

# The Unfettered Life of Kenyon of New Orleans

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"My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last forever"

--Thucydides

## Part I

### Koan 0

There was tranquility to be had in a long morphine induced sleep where dreams were as uneventful as the idealized restfulness of death; but though privileged enough to be impaired with such a substance and such a stance, Kenyon paid for this lengthy death afterwards with excruciating pain from her backbone being lodged inordinately in one position on her bed for hours, despite the pillows she put under her. One might say that her knowledge of the extreme pain that she would experience on awakening from these sleeps was serendipitous in its own way, for it made her reluctant to use the drug, or to use it sparsely at least; and sleep that was not assisted in such a way allowed her to grow new legs in a sense, for in these times of waking up from a lesser degree of pain she was able to venture over to a favored window draped with concatenated strands of diminutive sea shells, and briefly roam the countryside with eyes ravenous for space, beauty and freedom. This year and a half of house arrest of this policeman's spouse, this most diminutive being, though it was hardly the incarceration experienced by Ang San Suu Kyi or other famous political martyrs in its salience or its length, was in its solitary debasement and its degradation, of equal travail; and as it was Christmas Eve, every click of the air conditioner turning on in the hot day or the furnace at night, every flight of the pigeons from the nest behind the air conditioning unit, every thud of the cat jumping from a table, and she would think that it was Chuck whom she had not seen for eight days. It was eight days ago that he had taken away the television under the guise of getting it fixed, but in reality as a sadistic smite against her for looking more like a wilted plant each time he saw her—one that for whatever tremulous weltering of brainwaves were animated underneath still required maintenance as it rested in its stultifying enclave, shelved alone in a way most felicitous to plants but stygian to more interconnected beings. And with each minute of her yearning for her tormentor's return, of her wistful caprices for the clock to retreat to that time when she had a job as a paralegal -a time he was happy to be with her, she became wearier with the monotony of stymied expectation.

As one of her more substantive acts of each part of late day, Kenyon would always get into the wheelchair and mist her fern; and as she did so, she would think of morphine as another type of mist—not of water, but of effacing liquidity. If before she had been uncertain whether an awakened state was anything more than a slightly palpable dream, the morphine that she took for her scoliosis diminished the reality of seeming-wakefulness even further- her consciousness seemed dunked like fingernails in polish remover – her own fingernails not treated thus since long ago when she was a productive being with a job, when she had even had her own apartment and had been more than a kept plant watered every week or two, before Chuck became a policeman and incarcerated her, before the sink at the law office got clogged, and as a plumber, he had come to snake out their pipes, and hers most specially, when she had drifted from state to state with an entirely different man, a Thai-American, whom she had met

at a convenience store and whom she had shagged impudently in the illusion of love in quiet retreats behind Buddhist temples. Now she could only fixate on what living presences there were in the small space of the townhouse - like the mostly inert fern whose branches were sometimes blown upward, and which then seemed to be gesturing to her, keeping her awake longer than her on-and-off spasms of sleep usually allowed. But now the morphine was carrying her away on its tide again, into its effacing mists and though she must have had a thought or two at that moment, she would not have known what it was.

## Koan I

### Chapter One

From here at this early hour, with the rising sun hardly visible and in the superficial sheen of the nigrescent mire illuminated by the still ebullience of stretched refractions of the infrequent light of gas lamps, nothing seemed to change. To her, so forlorn and so needy of an impression other than the permanent reckoning of the impermanence of all things, that which she gazed upon was a placid and mollifying defiance of mutable time. Tranquil and imbibing in that sense, the languid waters of the bayou mesmerized her with stillness no different from the continuous disgorging of a lit fountain. And viewed from a squatted position in a drier expanse of trees and damp sprawling grass void of human presence including, it seemed, her own, flowed, turbid and malodorous the misdirected current. It was almost stagnant, and in certain areas adulterated by garish stretch marks of defilement in this remnant of night, and wistfully, she gazed across its rancid, whorish expanse. But should she sink placidly into the body of water and permanence as she had into all those stray men, so desperately and so decadently, it would cease to be tranquil, cease to seem immutable and eternal. And this she knew, even if she did not consciously think it, did not think anything really, as she sat among the weeds of the copse moving her body only when aching limbs necessitated. Stationary as a stick insect, with the same staring, mimicking stillness, she did nothing, was nothing. As discomfited as she had been in the tragic vagaries of the past, and the past few weeks in particular (a commonality with its own unique pattern of devastation) but still having some sense of herself and managing to wander through fogged thickets of recalcitrant days, existing functionally enough, it was only for a period of hours that she was refuse this deep in the bin of the self; that she was debris of rocks tumbling into this perennial crevasse.

Something happened. What was it? the shallow regions of her mind asked, taunted even, to no avail other than to reveal cracks which, from either the reverberations of former blows in life or what was still alive underneath and sought escape, appeared in the bottom layers of the icy methane of her consciousness. Sticks, once aging and weakened fingers of limbs to trees, were lost to spur growth, or torn asunder from random gusts by the god of chance and was she not the same? She stared down at an area of grass near the tips of her feet; ants with their miniscule hungers of physical, amorous immersions common to all so as to be manipulated into breeding and reproduction, and yet of a species, like all species, still not guaranteed an absolute right of continuum for whatever mating rites, whatever miniscule illusions of intimacy, they pursued successfully (all species, even with the longevity of their reign, were temporary occupants of the world no different, in that respect from human creatures) walked on her feet and legs freely. She picked up a stick. Even lowly birds built nests with sticks and had offspring and routines, had meaning and purpose from founding their lives on a foundering misconception of permanence, but the homeless had no such illusion. People such as that were as dust that blew askance from the automated brushes of industrialized street cleaning machines. Such filth needed to be buffeted aside to make the city clean. Trash was collected, but human trash, dross equivalent to dust, was not. It was this, the animated human trash, which, at 6 AM from shelters, was disposed by being set outside to blow away on street pavements, and from rude remarks to turn here, to turn there with a nightmarish malaise and numbness that was their world, that was them.

### Chapter Two

Sometimes she would try to avoid being a physical presence shunned by every face that she encountered, by thinking that she was part of someone else's imagination. Often she could be found floundering purposelessly with fluttering plastic bags of soiled laundry in hand as sails, never, like her peers, permitted to moor at any harbor as they, these eyesores of New Orleans, would sully scenic and cultural attractions—or so the policemen insinuated. Their identification cards were always checked as though their bags, like ships' cargo, might contain biological agents or other homeland security risks. As a person had no intrinsic worth unless he performed some commercial task, couldn't these insubstantial adumbrations of humanity be left alone to blend in like any shadow of building, awning, or tree projected insubstantially around the peaceful and comely parts of the city? No, too much insubstance was substance the policemen thought. Having a matrix of these homeless people, these homelessers abound, was even worse than having to put up with illegal migrant farmers or hireling drifters, for the latter, at least, were a temporary encumbrance. The former stayed on indefinitely.

Substance or immaterial, as they were, the homeless did not waft fragrantly. They diffused, like a fetid odor from an enormous factory, across the city. And yet with their bagged contraband, they seated themselves at park benches or on banks along the estuary and, although when inadvertently falling asleep (the exhaustion of aimless wandering around New Orleans always prompting immediate sleep), security guards and police, Chuck-lers, would be in their faces, sometimes quoting ordinances, and always chasing them away. The exception, of course, was here in the early hours, here where no one should be and yet a place where there were no voices demanding her riddance. Here among brazen crows and vicious water monitors that would prey on them or on any sundry animals that meandered along the embankment, among enshrouded worms and stealthy alligators, the ignominy that she was could get reprieve from the reproaches of human eyes that in aversion redirected askance; and she, even though she did not feel as though she existed, could partake of this respite of not having to reside in the majestic hubris of the thoughts of prosperous enmity any longer. Here she, freeloading anathema, a defunct shadow, a material space without a function, a ruined street person without the wherewithal to be part of the job market, did not have to look at all the gainfully employed with yearning. She did not need to hunger with the wistful gaze of the poor youth, mostly Hispanic and African American, who stared enviously at products behind shop windows. Here she was equal to mosquitoes which in her hours of squatting seemed to have bit all her proportions; here she was bereft of thoughts and plans, which were, after all, of less consequence than the lightning bugs that swarmed now amongst the towering dog weed. Here, she was not made to believe that she was mentally deficient, that she was a mad vessel floundering in the city's waves, or a tiny and blighted part in the commonality of the human ship of 7 billion from which some, deemed useless, were forced into madness by being discarded and left to drift aimlessly.

She just existed. And yet it did not have to be that way, for if it were not a stigma to be of no commercial worth one, like her, might even excel at enhancing intrinsic worth, contemplating ideas, each according to his or her abilities, beyond that which was allotted to the commercially minded masses; but that was not to be. No, she was no thinker. But her pain had transformed her into a paragon of empathies. Seething feelings accompanied by indistinct memories of the subconscious surfaced from the fathoms of her brain, and reeled in the exposure. Two or three times throughout the sunless early morn she became even more discomfited by thinking of her brother, Scoliosis. Before he began to hobble – the reason he stumbled one day and lost his life in that hit and run accident - he was quite vibrant in his way. Now these stratified memories arising from a time so long ago, which were pleasantly hidden in an upper layer of the superficial substance and translucency of memory--was the thought of them crossing the fence and going into the cows' pasture. There, in the paddock, they would call the beasts over, light fireworks in their excrement, and watch the ordure splatter their faces. How many times they had done it, she could not say – she barely recognized the resurfacing memories as her own in their brief resuscitation. Scoliosis was also good at playing Monopoly, and one cold winter the four of them, without a furnace, used to cuddle close together while playing, eating popcorn and listening to 70s melodies. Their happiness was her torture, for always remembering the brevity of perfect pleasure gained in being consort to another, a brother at that, was a constant abscission when his suffering ended in death.

The shelters being merely a means of keeping the unseemly blight invisible for a third of the 24 hours, and reducing the possibility of theft when property owners were asleep, their home was the streets. Unwanted, lost, unemployably numb, the homeless had neither routine nor interaction for most of the day, the meanderings of ants moving seriatim imbued more sanity, and she who was now crouched in knee-high weeds, mute and dumb, interacting less than an ant, had no words to conceptualize her pitiful state. Was she in fact thinking at all? She was in her own way, for what was a thought if it did not start with diffused feeling? And diffused feeling she had throughout her body and inordinately so, like river water diffused with the silt of lamentation.

### Chapter Three

Something happened. What was it? Could she identify a cause, an impetus, a catalyst? If one incident and its matrix, its entourage of thought, were to be imputed, it would have to be her having gone into that convenience store six hours earlier. She had entered to buy an ice cream bar with the little change that she had left from food stamps. It was to be a self-congratulatory reward for suffering through existence, a temporary item of temporary pleasure that might at the moment of consumption make it seem as though pleasure were the predominant and most substantive part of her life, a treat of recompense for the vanished concept of family (her mother used to buy Ice Cream bars for her not so long ago and her name, Kathy, was forever associated with the treats, as though it oozed quietly through the chocolate). Behind the counter, a male clerk, or an indefatigably ruthless manager, was ordering a female worker to stoop down to stock the lower shelves with cigarettes, which she subserviently did. Surreptitiously staring longingly at her shape, it was obvious he wanted this Miss Bender; and if there were no laws or social restraints of any kind, and no customer in his midst, it seemed he would have gone for her with the fullest of force, there and then. Kenyon witnessed this adventitiously, acknowledged it as the natural state, and that the natural state was the true design of the malevolent designer. Institutions like that of legal rape in marriage existed as the more acceptable conduit of these intractable caprices to avert the genocide of unrestrained appetites run amuck on city streets. She watched as Miss Bender, instructed now to go up, stocked the higher shelves before pulling down the lid to cover the content. And from that lid descending Kenyon thought of how although the latched coffin lid on her mother would have fallen a lot sooner without the intervention of medical science, it still had fallen, and so humanity could only briefly maintain itself in this world where microbes had the last meal. This she knew, though her education and intelligence were not so vast, her analytical skills not so keen, and her personal experience of loss the only means for her surmising; it was a commoner's general impression of the world, an unrefined emotional response to it all.

The man suddenly turned away from Miss Bender and looked directly at Kenyon. He knew that she knew his eyes had been grazing lecherously on his co-worker and he grinned as if to say that he enjoyed someone seeing his vainglorious love for his own lewdness, in doing so displaying that male virility that was dominant in him and all his kind. His look suggested that if he were permitted to have his way with the bender, and Kenyon were to remain in the store, that he would insert himself into her as well. She could see that he barely stopped himself from laughing at her, this sole witness and confessor of his peccadillo. To her, he looked like a younger version of John Travolta whose 16 year old son had tragically passed away due to Kawasaki Syndrome; and she loved him for looking like a superstar, one of the illustrious who should be beyond the gravity of the tragic, and when found not so, were mourned like no other creatures since for they who had nothing, a superstar was starlight in dark obscurity whose tragedies were tantamount to dying suns. And she believed that he liked her, for they who had no one in the world to spare them a solitary thought had to believe that some being would care, and, in the absence of one rendering this solicitude, would create one of their own—as a stray cat that hungered for any crumb, a bird singing in their direction or the tactile finger tips of the sun god Aten. And so she coveted the lecherous look of a convenient store cashier wanting to disgorge his ejaculate into some recipient or another so that the tension of subservient labors could cease for a while and sleep could overtake him. Despite nicknaming the man “Scoliosis” silently in the recesses of her brain and feeling a tie to him, the thought of her mother’s corpse rotting in her grave and of her own tenuous presence on Earth, sank her into a state of near somnambulism.

### Chapter Four

She was a dark shadow in the sheen of the nigrescent mire of the bayou lit obscurely by artificial light at some distance and by the diffused illumination of the full moon which at times pulled her into it when, less mesmerized by the water, she looked up into the sky. What she could register of self came only from pain. She had open blisters that were like shards of glass under her feet; but they were nothing in their effect compared to the fragmented glass of her concept of self, this affront to the virtue of affluent society. Virtue was merely dissembled bigotry against those without a function, for it opposed slaves insolent enough to starve themselves to death rather than perform subservient tasks. Hate from society at large, conveyed in looks of aversion, was launched at the homeless like canon balls. And so the welkin, and the water, was real, but she was not. And subliminally, mutely, she cried out for her mother as if, alone and contrary to all others who were deceased, she had the power to resurrect herself, and despite obviously having fallen, once in death, would ultimately be found not subject to this black hole of change which pulled everything else forward, and might defy the state of cooled and coagulated matter that was destined to rejoin all the hot spewing energy of the universe. It was a prayer amongst billions, each a selfish cry, and if there were a god, he would have to turn up the volume on His iPod and lodge the filial of his headphones to tune out the cacophonous fury of the selfish babble; but she knew obtusely that a prayer was like the plop of a rock in a pond, a solitary sound that went nowhere.

More minutes went by with her crouched, squatted in one position, as if on an Asian toilet bowl, and they too became a half hour in the hours of the days of the months of the years of her life. And from somewhere into the vacuity of her conscious mind came a thought: as a timid, inhibited child, had there not been times in which she had sat silently with her father, an uncle, and a female cousin - a cousin who had been family by proximity in a brief period of her life only to be ultimately taken away by their move to Texas--roasting hotdogs and marshmallows in a forest not so different from this one, but one not inundated in bayou and with the flow of a rivulet far into the background. Wasn't there at that time a belief that children like themselves were born from a body by love and were not merely reproductive cellular byproducts, fluidity from organs of urination and insemination? Wasn't there a time that she believed at any moment of any day the monster man would repent of accosting her sexually, or that his claims of needing to be closer to her, of not having a release with his wife's back injury and indifference to anything but rosaries and hail Mary's, that were used as his justification right before each encounter, could be errors of mind like her mother's certainty that her comb had disappeared from the place she had put it. Back then, wasn't there a belief that this family of indigenous American Indians and pseudo-animists of a Catholic nuance, this seemingly eternal unit, would soon deliver her into a world of real love? How, back then, could she have foreseen this hope rendered non-existent, as if her parents had been figments of her imagination, and the horror of her family remaining far from the model of rectitude for all her callow prayers and wistful hopes?

Of course she could have gotten married, been Mrs. McBride, and pretended that her second family was more real than her first, letting it pass away the way the Earth would pass away in a supernova, allowing for new thriving bodies to emerge. It would be no different from what everyone else did, but her mother was alive and well for so long, and the years passed making her middle aged and her mother old. Her belief that a second family was more real than the first was a mere turning of the fabric inside out, claiming it to be a different coat. In any case, how, if there had been a man, which there wasn't, could she have abandoned her mother (only the abyss of now could and did compel her towards men, men usually of a dark hardened onyx sheen and a poignant body odor who took her under a bush in a patch of grass in the middle of a boulevard in dark shadow – there could be a baby growing within her at this moment. Was she pregnant? She did not know). Family: it was something that one freely chose for oneself instead of the random gestation of the conflation of seminal and ovarian secretions, the product of two bodies that could never be altered until death and decomposition. As family was a chosen commitment, a contract signed not by blood but by volition, it could be unsigned. It could be altered; but when it was nurturing for two parties, both making the other into better people, there was no reason for it to be such. She would have sensed the truth of this, and if she were capable of volition now, she would have rejected what she sensed as true as she had all these years before. For now, even though the hapless former family had felled like an old tree, a fetus might be within, and if there were this inchoate child, would it one day shun her as someone who was not family?

## Chapter Five

Stooped to the earth as she now was, a subconscious impression, or thought, came to her: the moon was now being vanquished by light and fog in vying factions of the seemingly eternal; and for some time --she wasn't sure if it was minutes or hours-- a silver dust of a chunk of heavens seemed to be gradually falling down upon her like a slow ethereal avalanche, cascading its debris to bury senses and impressions. For a few seconds she thought of it as death of the world, the conqueror and emancipator; but the fog usurper, justifiably impaled by darkened tree limbs, was sputtering and splattering as though wounded and bleeding. She did sense the spreading descent of the fog, the water dripping off of limbs, the increasing visibility of the land, if not the water, from the dawn of morning, but did not consciously register what these sensations were, for how could sensory input of this nebulous state be fully registered in a nebulous state of her own? Then, in an accretion that even she noticed consciously, the fog, despite its impalement, seemed to be dramatically thickening and enlarging, billowing downwards to the point where she could hardly see the bayou in all this drapery. It seemed to be commandeering the eternal, and in its coup d'état, replacing itself into the status of water and welkin.

Finally her earlier perception returned more resolutely, more astutely, and a dark foreboding wrought the present. She acknowledged it as the usurper fog, and knew that, despite its growth, the dark branches in collusion with the sunlight, were murdering the pervasive translucent body that had become the new expression of the eternal. Maybe, she must have thought, this

enlargement was the fog's rigor mortis, and evaporation its decomposition. But, whatever the degree of her awareness, there was some form of recognition or cognition - a recognition that made her partially discomfited and partially reassured simultaneously. Hers was a wish to forever be entombed in fog which could only be fleeting, with limbs piercing and sunlight searing it as it was.

And she remembered a photograph of herself as a young child on her mother's lap and seated next to her brother, Scoliosis. She remembered the feel of her mother's legs in pantyhose when she swept her hand along the lap she once had sat upon as a pig tailed girl, and this memory came down upon her as heavily as sunlight to fog. And for a second she was once again with Scoliosis placing firecrackers in the cow's ordure, calling the pretties over, and lighting their excrement to have a living mosaic. Climbing over the fence, placing the fireworks as candles to cake, caked into the cow's excrement, calling them over, and lighting the matches --where had it all gone? Where had these two wily and insouciant siblings gone? It seemed that it had happened just a day ago, that sitting with her mother and Scoliosis for that photograph on that rainy day, now defunct and lost to all but memory, had just happened two days ago. And the thought of lost family fell upon her even more heavily. If she had considered, if she had had the wherewithal to consider, wouldn't she have felt lucky that inside she never matured - that, throughout her life, she never lost, within the heart, the callow love for her mother the way others did? Those hobbies with the two of them dressing up dolls, and disguising tissue boxes to look like dogs, and that time of carrying to her an empty aluminum tray of an empty TV dinner filled with a mélange of wild flowers was lost to all but her throbbing head alone.

No connection to the past was possible with all this spilling in time and space. Those who were mature knew this, and those who were abused the way she had been should have known the same. If nature relegated a being to the continuity of forward change, why then, when one could never relive an instant of it, was there memory, especially when it was so torturous? This she did not think, but felt, as a tortoise moved near her right foot. And, vaguely, she became cognizant of all those beautiful but eerie distortions of shadows of leaves so large that a fourth of her body could sit into any one of these colossal leaf adumbrations. Wasn't it beautiful, she felt? They too, were her shadowy counterparts and, unsuccessfully, she tried to pick up a phantom leaf by its vine adumbration. But, for now, she was material substance and it would resist her.

## Chapter Six

Seductively, the body of waters enjoined her to slip into their elements the way men slip into women, the way, upon the death of her mother and in this homeless state, she was slipped into, willfully ravaged near a stretch of highway, both the man and the woman to briefly escape their hours of vacuity, only with less force and greater ease. It importuned that she should walk into the fetid baptism pool as a puerile, brainwashed child to the immersion, that if terribly shallow she should crawl into it embracingly, instinctively, as an infant placed in a tub of bathwater toward an early arrival at the finish line in the moribund inevitability of all; and in its peremptory but tacid mandates of a less beautiful and smaller being to a greater expanse, that she should do so expeditiously, and that like the movements of a water monitor or water snake, it should be done with hardly causing a ripple. But the latter injunction being an impossibility, there was left just the sentiment of identifying with reptiles that no longer than an hour ago she had seen gracefully submerge in full intercourse with nature, and of wishing that she had gone down as they, were there no changes to be had in this placid, vacuous expanse. But change there would be especially with her big body, and the thought of disrupting the tranquility restrained her demise. It forced her to relinquish such a peaceful, aquatic end rather with the supposition that if her sedentary role were abandoned, and she were to enter these waters, which would most certainly spit her out as a bloated floating corpse, alligators, as rare as they were, might maul the cadaver.

There were also no warning signs anywhere in the particular path that she had forged into the thickets all these hours: neither the metallic and tangible warnings of the possibility of alligators strewn in wood, weed, swamp, and brambles, nor the public memory of recent events which should have governed action. It was just three months ago that a woman much older than she was had been raped, decapitated and dismembered. Pieces of her scattered remains and a partially devoured face on a head had bobbed in the bayou like lost branches and a ball that had become entangled in the sodden brush. As insular as she was, some version of the widely promulgated account had not escaped her entirely. At that time she was still working at a fast food restaurant, flipping burgers obliquely while traumatized by her mother's weakening state. Those imperfect replicas of cells within her sole companion had been hell-bent on their cancerous mission to oppose the normalcy of all other cells that only had only

collective but not individual merit, a rebellion against the dark, making the dark darker, more stygian, than it had to be. As a worker, the work had become her and, each day, she flipped and sizzled from the points of clocking in and clocking out. Among other stories, she had heard this one of the decapitated woman, head and limbs bobbing in the bayou, but scared of the derision that might be generated from the silent one saying anything, especially after three months of working there and scarcely saying anything, she asked nothing, and conveyed nothing. There was nothing to express.

Upon filling the order of "Double Whopper with cheese, please" she would have provided the delayed rejoinder of "Done: Double Whopper with cheese here!" or some such derivative. Variations of this would have been the only phrases to have come from her mouth when sliding the cooked items into the rack. Questions might have entered her mind about the body parts allegedly afloat in the bayou, but inwardly, as she could not think of anyone specifically to pose such questions to or how she would deliver them, the ideas became stillborn on her tongue. So stifled as she was, any departure from her ordinary utterances would no doubt have gushed out in awkwardly shunted spurts and spasms. Back then, she was merely trying to fulfill her perfunctory role as their burger burner, with the question of why people couldn't just eat them rare and why Burger King could not just pay her to stay at home to be with her mother entering her mind, and always interred there. Cognizant that she was just limbs and quick reflexes, not even a smile and a soft voice, the façade of cashiers, these automatons with a more human gloss, the rudest of logic suggested that she was much more expendable than visible employees and as expendable as a cracked Burger King tray; and thus she felt that she should not utter a sound.

On the day the body had been found in the bayou, from her distance she had listened to employees' piecemeal retelling of the news article's tale from heightened emotion of fear and boisterous revelry the impetus of sadistic impulses and relief not to be the victim. "Well, nobody should be in the bayou—everybody should know that," was a common utterance that made them feel that bad things only happen from foolish choices, and that they were immune to both. Obstreperous about the savage murder that she and they would have surmised to be so unnatural, (so little did they want to admit that killing was the natural order of things from the immune system killing viral and bacterial intruders and the ingestion of the macrocosm for the empowerment of diminutive cells, all the way up to mundane eternity; and that all would be Hobbesian mayhem without invisible ink spills on the tacit document of the social contract), they would continue talking about this issue for days, and their unkind words would make her withdraw further into herself. Her major concern was to finish work so as to return to her mother—and fix jambalaya or other Cajun dishes for her instead of cooking here, especially with her mother's state deteriorating despite all those prayers for divine intervention, those non-pagan invocations, and all those beliefs that the cancer would go into remission, which, for all her thumbing of rosary beads, it did not. So indifferent were the governing forces of her having to make a living in society. So indifferent they were to the needs of a dying woman and her daughter's relationship with her. So the numbness that pervaded her being expatiated its wordless rejoinder.

## Koan II

### Chapter One

The sun was rising, slowly burning off the fog as condensation dripped from the sodden limbs of trees, as from melting icicles. Had she been, if not placid in all this grief, at least slightly composed with some callow engagements celebratory of the present moment the best that could be done in such circumstances, and fabricating from simple and residual pleasures some agenda and meaning for her life, even with marginal awareness of herself and her surroundings—a deportment contrary to her present vegetative state and also contrary to the predominance of past glimpses and future preoccupations that were the emphasis of the typical adult mentality of survival, encroachment, and advancement, she might have been inclined to open her mouth and catch some of the occasional drops on her tongue, the way she, a belated American Indian severed of the culture, horselessness notwithstanding, had galloped her bicycle on rainy days with head tilted up to the clouds like a supplicant taking the Eucharist, sanguine in the ersatz of light rain. Back then, she had dreams of being as pregnant as a coconut tree, and of love exuding onto her from water lilies. It was an impossible conflation of fertile housewife and nun, of being a mother and a bit of a brothel proprietor, of Catholicism and being Buddha's disciple, having him pick the lotus for her as the ineffable sermon symbolizing the beauty and insignificance of the self in the natural order—a self that would not kick one's heels demanding to own when nothing

could be owned, and of being immortal when one was just a mortal being. Innocent, she would ride around even in a light storm, connected to the sense of being part of the natural order. Something so seemingly inconsequential would have helped in expediting her renewal when the stigma of being refuse from a shelter and of life with no artificially concocted meaning of job and family was so excruciating.

Mostly unaware and immobile as a stick insect, she only knew to remain low and camouflaged from all the predators that threatened her existence. But, in such fear, what type of life was this that she was living, and what actually was it that she feared most? She knew. It was not so much animals and human animals, but minatory change. But why had the changes of life disconcerted her in this way? Did it have to be this way? Yes, she answered herself subliminally, for most of these changes were from human impetus, and she was a fragile leaf on the stem, needing their approval, needing to feel as though she was valued as one of them. Baleful “society” was never an actuality per se; it was merely a perception, and for her, it was tainted by her lack of agenda and her limited contact with others. If “society” was so repulsed by her (most of her human interaction just in reacting to official commands to a multitude to get up when the lights were turned on in the warehouse of human trash, to take a shower and not steal the soap, or in more crass mandates, to show her Louisiana identification card to the inspection of police officers, to leave the public areas of parks, and other miscellaneous interactions indicating that one like her was an eyesore) did this knowledge have to be so personal and horrific? Sheltered refuse and those in piles on overpasses, at the edges of parks, with legs dangling from the benches of bus stops, within obscure shadows of parking lots, and there to be stumbled over on sidewalks, were no different than she was; and had she considered it, all the beggarly waste, both the freer and the more confined, were no different than billionaires, except the latter were in restive denial and defilement of their insignificance and impermanence, and had the wherewithal to engineer the construction of their decks of cards into businesses and edifices.

The poor might be emaciated subhuman creatures, but the corpulent and affluent were no better. They were not really men either, but fat craven stags fleeing the hunter; and the great hunter, which was the meaningless of man’s plight, stalked the minds of this entire species: both the rich and the poor. Those transients who squatted into spots of pavement to get some sleep needed to believe that the area they slept in belonged to them, and they belonged to it --the need for belonging, home, so visceral in a being. And what should have been an indictment of society and the gods for their apathy in allowing seemingly indolent beings to disintegrate in the streets because of their choice not to work, incapacity, sensitivity, or a hybrid of the three, instead became an indictment of the victim, the ignominious who might not have had or discovered a commercial worth in themselves, or who wanted worth that was beyond commercial parameters. The only hope was far into the future, a time in which work was not necessary, and human nature was quelled. There, in this distant time thousands of years hence, beings would be accredited their full, innate worth and would no longer be pilloried by the judgments of strangers in tacit but pronounced glances of aversion.

So the fog dripped, sometimes falling on sleeve and collar, exacerbating the musty odor of her blouse, while she, supine and splayed, with head propped against a tree, was ready to relinquish herself unto sleep and death. A rapist if he would come (she preferred them black) or an alligator if it would come (she preferred them large) were needed gyrations of feeling in this numbness that trapped her, mummified and sealed, in the sarcophagus of the mind. Fleeting images of self oppressed her. They were a hybrid of her and of some unknown self, a conflated and imaginary being with a baby in her arms. Any pleasure at the latent prospect of a child of her own, something at last hers, belied a fear of nursing the creature on the streets--a fear all the more salient in a time like this with mounting anxiety over insuperable fate sickening her and making her feel that even one was too much of herself.

## Chapter Two

After her mother’s death, the foreclosure, and the move into the shelter, there were certain times in these weeks when she had moments of absolute insanity. At such times, with the self sometimes entirely in a blackout, there was aimless movement and persistent anxiety concerning her silent and meaningless meandering which pressed onto her chest as if her lungs and heart were collapsing. There were nomadic street signs and business logos rushing around in her head, the eternal parade of the traffic of the productive brazenly roaring past her on all sides, all with a directive and purpose that made her shudder and grow dizzy as she thought of herself floundering in ineptitude-- her largest aspirations, as the food was more delicious there, that of finding her way to the Sunday dinner held by one of the local churches. There was also, in these bouts and spasms of madness, a recurrent thought of a girl with bright auburn tresses whom she often saw at a park along the river front – a ten year old who was



sometimes seen eating \$3.00 double dips of cookie dough ice cream in heaping cones the color of marble, and this blinking or self replicating image coming down upon her in succession and celerity. The reasons for slipping into her insanity no doubt were her impecunious state—money conjuring the material illusion of a human being. Without it, being was immaterial. It was relegated to shadow. The girl, a superior being, was different from all other forms. Unlike the stretched corpulence of regular beings-- hers more homely and diminutive than theirs, or even the oddity of the her brother, Scoliosis, with his rectangular face and robotic body with arched back which she had become accustomed to during his short life and her short time of innocence, the girl had diminutive and comely features accentuated by a gold necklace. And, despite the one image of her reappearing with the thumping of her heart, it, or she, would talk to her causing the demure, bete noire of a Kenyon to hide the best that she could (behind the trunk of a tree or under the exterior mirror of a car).

“Poor thing,” she would say the way one would talk to an emaciated dog, with a pursing of the lips as they clicked the bitch over to them. “Hasn’t anyone fed you today?” And sometimes her conversations were a taunting mixture of asperity and kindness that went something to the effect of, “Poor thing. You want my ice cream, don’t you? But there are a lot of you out there. If I were to give to all of you I would have nothing for myself and if that happens enough times I won’t buy any ice cream at all which would put the ice cream business out of business. Can’t you see that? The whole economy would suffer. If the cultured people were all to forego pleasures for your sakes there would be no refined pleasures—no art and cinema, no symphonies or learning. We would all be cuddled around each other for warmth and pleasure under thatched roofs of huts, our stinking feet on dirt floors, pregnant half our lives as sex would be the only free pleasure allowed to us. I would be in trouble if I were to give it, you know, just as I would if I were to give you other things—other things which you are also salivating for, your nose now twitching, implying that you want to get up to my crotch. Don’t look up at me so sad. Don’t thump your tail as if you’re angry at me when you know I care. I do. But if I can’t do it, I can’t, and I shan’t be blamed. If we were to blame anyone it might be your mamma. You must trust me on this. If she had given your daddy the beer and you the warm titty, instead of the reverse, you wouldn’t be such a mess, such a catastrophe. Look at Somalia. The famine is of their own making.”

And there were several times in which she went into an emergency room believing that she was experiencing chest pains. Here, there were compassionate voices in a sterile environment resuscitating her with brief and reassuring words, saying that they understood her situation, and that she should rest more if at all possible, eat more, but there was nothing that they could do as there was nothing substantively wrong with her. But these brief and commiserating words sensitively rendered every week or two prompted her to go on living in her world of vertiginous change and evanescent presences in which her name, Kenyon, was so infrequently uttered that there were moments in which she forgot it entirely. She was merely that which was on the identification tag which hung around her neck: 62009 Bed 306. In all those years in which her mother, among others, spoke her name, the namer and the named seemed so perennial. But that was back then when the fluid illusion of the solidity of life abounded. It was a time when she thought the worn relationships of her tattered family would be darned or refurbished like her mother's love seat and her father's recliner. Back then, life was still an expression of love—and she thought this way until last morsel of her horrid family was swallowed by the gluttonous earth.

Here she was, all alone at the age of 38, uneducated and poor, and due to this persistent consternation over her mother's death and the loss of her job when bra strap broke while she was squeegeeing the windows of the Burger King—the brassiere falling through her shirt and thudding onto the sidewalk as though it too were colluding against her most righteously, almost slipping out of the realm of what was human. The foreclosure on their house, the only home she had known, was the last circumstantial evidence confirming that the planet despised her. Thereafter, she was relegated to this upended walk of the streets, doomed by sensitivities and circumstance. Whether or not her social worker at the welfare office thought that she was averse to work, whether or not the world thought of her as the utmost blight, theirs was perspective and conjecture. What did the world—what did the few others who knew of her know of her (not that that they gave her much thought)? What did those of plenty, who did not have to reach in to tug on the elastic to keep their underwear from falling off, know of the human soul? Lack of volition towards employment was not exclusively a recalcitrant act to those whose fragile frame of mind could not risk being fired again. She was just unable, in her weakened state, to subscribe to the laws of survival and the venality of the self-imposed slavery of working at convenient stores and fast food restaurants.

As she had gone so many hours beyond curfew, there would have been no point in thinking about returning to the shelter now; and so when such an idea of where she could go, or fear of where she was at now, brushed over her consciousness--there were such random touches of ideas of volume and palpability, prompting her to leave the Bayou for safer, drier, and more restful respites (it was, after all, laundry day and staff members would soon be giving them tokens for the washing machines which, based on rules predicated on what was convenient to the organization, could not be obtained on any other day), she curtailed such yearnings. There would just be more of this walking aimlessly throughout the night the way she did with the days, or sitting in various spots of the bayou, falling asleep some minutes, and this gazing out into dog weed which blew against her face reassuringly as though she were a domestic animal being petted by nature.

There was feeling in this numbness, texture in the malaise. It was an interior fog so dense as to be palpably ineffable, and it had overtaken her, transmuting her from animated being to a figurine in a frieze. Ornament of ineptitude, totally free so as to become emblematic of absolute uselessness, freedom awry of one without routine and purpose where others could neither be conceptualized nor plausibly fabricated. Each moment of this evening, now a morning, now becoming a bright morning, her mind was shutting down. Here, in this bayou, in the sublunary domain of a diminishing moon, there was none of the capitalistic servitude of cooking hamburgers that she was once subject to - no servitude at all, but then no sanity at all, or a sanity that was as loose as a loose lid on a jar; and she might well continue in this perennial skidding along as any dried up leaf, with this loathsome queuing between ropes in a cordoned off area of a parking lot leading to a soup kitchen. She would not be so different from other scavenging animals, although unlike them, these nocturnal beings, she was not recognized by her peers, and did not find rest in sleeping outdoors. It was not even restful to be indoors with herds of other nameless, petulant human beasts each with his or her assigned number.

And so she was out here; and even should the administrators at the homeless shelter relent and let her return to her bunk, which they would do if she were to prove that she had been seen by a physician at an emergency room of a hospital at the time immediately preceding the curfew, that prescription medication, if she were on any, could have caused a lapse of memory about the curfew, or that she was pregnant, why should she return? In the outdoors, if she doused herself in insect repellent she could sleep on and off in nature without being part of this demeaning driving of the herd, being a branded pig under a sheltered trough, a number and not a name. Policemen who came along the edge of the park would wake her later than shelter administrators and do it with less asperity, which gentle sensitive souls like hers needed as desperately as food and water, and to feel the warmth of the sun stroke her skin and the smell of the verdant mat beneath her as it warmed in the morning sunlight was one of life's sublime pleasures. Pregnant? Yes, she might be, and yes, she might be able to prove it. Pregnant? Better to give birth in a shelter than to be hatched with alligator eggs in the bayou--a baby, a bush baby at that, a nascent formation like a tumor that could have only come about in conception weeks earlier with her body and his under a bush in a parcel of park between two intersections, with thick shadow seeming to wall them on every side and traffic roaring around them as they rolled around each other in asphyxiating carbon emissions rather than the immaculate frosted verdure of clouds that surround putti in the Raphael painting. Only carbon emissions would augur the conception of this child, if she were indeed pregnant. Had she been raped? She was not sure that she would know what that word meant as even those who loved life played with death. So was this a consensual act? She certainly had followed his gestures and summons. Her weakness for intimacy had ravaged her as much as the man's force against her resistance had, and the sex was a titillating, massaging respite from pain. Selfish, ravenous, gluttonous, penetrating as a knife, and vicious as it was, this act of voracious hunger was loving in some sense. She was a victim of rapine as all needy, hungering inhabitants of the world were victims - the state of things retarding what virtues they could create for themselves. As much as she could in her thought eradicated-state of mind with successful partial numbing of all feeling, she begged the fates to not allow her to be pregnant with this black man's child, a man whom she had met in a queue that had formed for the purpose of obtaining some mixed fodder of slop in Styrofoam cups, a man whom she had envisaged as God when he had gently laid his eyes upon her, and in so doing, had blessed her with acknowledgement as a real human being.

Certainly in being swallowed up into this void within herself, not thinking of the ramifications, defying curfew as she had, albeit inadvertently, her bed, unless she proved her pregnancy - a pregnancy that her consciousness did not wish to consider - would be taken by someone else, and she would be from this point forward homeless in every connotation of the word. Certainly if a child were born to her, he would be immune from specious notions that people had intellect enough to assemble fortitude against circumstances (her own life bearing witness otherwise just as any rotting cadaver did). In that sense, if a child were so unlucky to be born unto her, ignorant as he would be in all other things, he would be free of this insipid bit of ignorance. And were she to consider that for a woman of no means Aid for Dependent Children could be the salvaging of a hapless life, would she not want it then? Were she to sense a lifeline being tossed to her in her abject poverty would she not favor pregnancy? She

did not think so, as in this state she did not really think, so what she would have wished for had she been privy to the information or, already having it in the deep recesses of her brain, able to aptly recall it, no one could say - and to say anything would be the basest of conjecture.

## Chapter Four

Vacuous edifices commandeered her impressions: an alloyed structure topped with an effervescent dome which would flood in rains; one of pure effervescence and the whole toppled and crushed as it was given a material roof; walls, pillars, and dome of another, an ethereal rotunda seconds from vanishing entirely as had the impaled and seared fog moments earlier. And then there was a string of row houses. She was registering the bayou, the here and now, less all the time, and if she comprehended some residual of self in the marshy surroundings, she was hardly able to sense it while passing in and out of these sporadic bouts of sleep. Still, if only with the vaguest of feeling and the substance of her dreams she must have realized that that which she called spiritual was without substance. It was merely a euphemism for her own ineptitude at competing for resources: her own failure to domineer and thrive. Mild in nature, insignificant as a drizzle, she was the epitome of futility. She inhabited this telluric domain, this only sphere accessible to man; and all that she called spiritual was merely a derangement of the mind, a specter imagined from the neurosis of one terrified by the impermanence of life. She surely sensed this, despite conveniently believing in God and the Heavens – and believing that in repudiating the game of competition for survival that she would be fed nonetheless like any of His smaller and more innocent creatures.

And so it was for a time. At the St. Vincent de Paul shelter she was taken care of — she who was a token on their religious chess board, there to be moved at the volition and dictates of their self-righteous condescension consisting of tuberculosis tests for all, psychological battery assessments, literacy tests, drug tests, mandates on when to take a shower, when to go to the bathrom, the scant possessions she could store under her bed on a given night, when to get up, how many articles of clothing she could request that they remove from her locker in the mornings, and when to leave, all under the direction of administrators with the philosophy that it was those who were crazy who became homeless, and not that homelessness made one crazy. To some degree, she must have sensed that this world was all there was, that ideals were the mind's ability to rectify or compensate for the deficiencies of the tangible, and that in imagining a better state than that which in fact existed, one could erroneously think that such an idea, such an ideal, was the real state.

She had been so good—such pristine pulchritude when younger all the way up into uglifying middle age, but the black void at last came down upon from all sides. Family was dumped into the trash bin of the ground as rotting refuse in a landfill, and as she had gotten into this homeless state, what else was there but sex with that which matched the void? And she thought that her man and someone like herself were in an apartment in a row house with a nigrescent baby on a couple of pillows on the floor, and her man drinking her milk as he made love to her on a bed instead of copulating with her under a bush. They were welfare recipients of the higher, homed class and it all seemed so good as she clung to him, this material presence. They were making love as baby remained pillowed among scurring cockroaches, and it had all come about most serendipitously with her, a half hour earlier, remonstrating and decrying his encounters with other women most theatrically in a jealous rage that caused her to put a knife to her throat and, when it was taken from her, to struggle with him—the struggle culminating with her man slapping her around a bit, and her wilting in a corner where he urinated on her, this lugubrious presence, as though wilting in the pot as she was and watering upon herself, only his watering on her would revive her. And after he reasserted himself as her master, having watered her face, there ensued the puissant sexual exhilaration that she was presently experiencing. This acceptance of man driven by promiscuous urges that he was not able to master, and of woman, the man's main woman, needing to partake of some of them regardless of his infidelity, was a radical departure from the indignant moral stance of leaving a man, a most pathetic flight into the imaginary world of pure essences, specious delusions that would have caused her to lose the material and the sexual satisfaction that accompanied it had she pursued inane integrity and estrangement.

## Chapter Five

She realized that, for the most part, she was constantly slipping, one after another, into these variations of something that was less real than that which went under the misnomer of awakened reality, which possessed a dreaminess of its own. Sleep, even as

nightmares, was not so dreadful as it had no lingering consequences; and perhaps this provided the distinction: that which was less unreal had to be more dreadful. It was base reality, like never to once again sleep in a bed, or to sleep in one in a shelter, that made her terrified. It was base reality that was life's salient horror. For one who had no money, to also not have any place to stay, and thus, not think of survival, was tantamount to having no thought other than survival, and every so often the idiocy of what she had allowed to happen to her bore down upon her consciousness.

In having stayed longer in nature than she should have done to be in the succor and solicitude of nonjudgmental essences, dismissing not only the thought of the curfew enforced by the shelter but all calculative thoughts of obtainment, or at least of doing what she had to do to keep herself from losing what little she had, she had not only lost her bed but lost a more simplified means of getting some minimal sustenance. Furthermore, she would be, from this day forward, even more vexed when suddenly needing to seek shelter from the elements (a tree, an awning set up by a hot dog vender, a public library, the rim of a roof to some locked building) or to relieve herself in the nearest toilet (one in a park, a more natural one behind a bush, a Jack-in-the-Box, a KFC, a McDonalds); and this vexation would cause her to relinquish matters of the mind, and forfeit the possibility of higher thought - not that much higher thought could be had if she were to have a menial job cooking ground beef patties in 10 hour shifts five, and sometimes six days per week.

And so she was left to be mauled by the incidents of her life that could never be entirely forgotten, memories that were beyond the surgeon's ability to perform precise and apposite lobotomies-- lobotomies that might restore her to the capability of joy and trust that all were born for. Denied this blessing, she was left with only the wistful inclination for the perspicuity needed to write her disorganized random thoughts as diary epistles to the self. Within a diary she might write of tormented life, albeit torment beautified in the clarity of words, or what clarity her egregious grammar, orthography and non sequiturs would allow. It would be the spring cleaning of the home of her brain, the reorganization, and distancing of herself from negative events that as much as trashed her, and only its achievement could extricate her from the possession of a horrific and convoluted life. And what, under these circumstances now, could be more horrific and inextricable than to be homeless, living on the streets, and having a "black bastard" growing within her body? And yet, as perdition had many Dantesque tiers, worse than being pregnant would be being pregnant by her own father. Was she pregnant from him? She did not know, as though there would be much to discern. It was not as though ejaculate could live in a woman for years--it had been seven years since the death of her father, and longer since he was within her. The god of the cancer sticks had mercy enough to bring her father down long ago. Much younger then, hadn't this been a continual worry from all that activity together; and instead of being grateful for his demise, she had shed tears for the death of this incestuous monster. Was she foolish for loving him, and crying at his death as though all of civilization had fallen into ruins as this man dropped into a pit in the ground? Perhaps; and yet so little one knew of the significance of any incident upon its immediate occurrence. Whether more astutely judged as good or bad was dependent altogether upon a retrospective view of an incident upon the whole of a life, or less ambitiously, when considered against the backdrop of the events of all that had happened previously. In her case, all the bad of her life looked good when contrasted with the potential horror of giving birth to her father's child, which, thankfully, never materialized, making his incest with her not so bad, his fatherly love ill conceived and misplaced but not to be repudiated--no, he was not a cruel and unloving man. Homo sapiens in existence for 100,000 to 200,000 years, depending on what one called human, with the inception of social man in an agrarian society not earlier than 10,000 years ago, incest was no doubt there from the beginning, and so they were hardly the first. Indeed, there was nothing new under the sun. As she was not pregnant upon his death, it also made the trinity of gods or the one god - she was not sure which it was as she just accepted and regurgitated that which she was conditioned to believe - not at all unkind. The god of the cancer sticks was in fact quite compassionate. And, now when she thought of sex, not of him but the normal way, she assumed it to be a sport of the illusion of intimacy and the gluttony of pleasure, the intermingling of bodies in the right way to achieve maximum pleasure, and for this one needed players; but marriage was more than play--it could not be had with sportsmen, but required true and deep intellectual and spiritual bonds, and it was this, now as then, that she hungered for with the limited intellectual capacity she was capable of.

And just for a split second she correctly imagined herself in time and space, there under trees, bayou all around, but with a blackened child in her arms. Both were weathered from the days the way stone was weathered in millennia. This imagined caprice, this chimera of another of life's horrors, became a thought, and the thought made her nauseous. Sickened, with the feeling surging inexorably, she vomited on the tree, and its substance cascaded like a pallid orange cataract albeit ever so insidiously, its insidiousness seeping around each part of the bark. No, there was no thought of Aid for Dependent Children in her mind. No selfish thought resided there for there was nothing human about her as she had no hubris. A leaf at her feet decaying more quickly, albeit imperceptibly, from the dank descent of fog that had come upon the earth and died on the earth, anointing the rot of all fallen things, was what she wanted to be --not a higher animal with a misconception of self, and every solipsistic

thought set on obtaining survival and comfort. She just wanted to be a rotting leaf gradually decomposing by natural forces, cognizant of nothing and part of all natural phenomenon.

## Chapter Six

Scarce as the danger of alligators was, still there should have been signs posted to forbid entry, and there should have been more active memory - memory of the report of that young woman whose minced body was found floating in various areas of the bayou. Memory, cognizance of the past, with its purpose to protect one from the dangers of future endeavors, would be a fully useful contrivance of the brain were it not for this continual falling into and scrambling out of shallow ravines of partially forgotten, and, through imagination, erroneously reconstructed past. These fallings in and out memory made one a felled being throughout the days of his or her life. As detached as she was as to be scarcely aware of existing, the last thing to garner her concern would have been the possibility of alligators ripping open and devouring her peaceful remains, dead or alive as she might be. Immured and calcified behind her skull, scarcely more alive than the skull itself, she was incapable of any real thoughts. There could have been no conscious offering of herself as an oblation to these mordant creatures, although what she might have thought on a subliminal level was another thing altogether.

Now, sickness was adding feeling and reflection to vacuous consciousness. She reeled from the fact that God, invidious God, called a person unto him in everlasting life through insidious death, as was the case with her mother by culling that life, wrenching it, depriving it of strength, virility, and awareness. It was no better than a host welcoming a guest by having him denude himself and lie prostrate to act the part of a missing door mat. As needy as she was of succor in her loss, for a few minutes she had trouble finding comfort in the wafting stench of the languid water and its once whorish glow of artificial light which was now a natural silver sheen, the less vituperative crickets with their rather rhythmic percussion of cacophony, the sudden passing of a scurrying water monitor near her feet, the forbidding nature of the bayou with upper branches of tree limbs flailing and casting sullen shadows below, and the brazen croaking of diminutive toads that overpowered all. Reeling from man and God, natural products, how could nature, the movement of all this plenum, be relished with its protective stings and poisons? But then she returned to what she was with none of the negative aspects of nature seeming to penetrate her obtuse consciousness, ardent as she was to be at one with the dank environment around her. And so she continued to loiter more or less where she was: at an earlier time, seated on a log; then, for a couple hours, almost genuflecting to a large rock; then further up the bayou, splayed like a cadaver with face sometimes shrouded in the tips of grasses, unable to recall being in earlier postures and having no concept of where she was or what she was doing, although there was no doubt that whatever little there was of her was breathing, feeling her thick bangs fold and unfurl in sudden gusts of wind, natural forces that thwarted the inanimate constancy which she longed for. She was standing now as sitting had become uncomfortable (the smell of her vomit on the lower trunk of the tree prompting the change), feeling travail but unable to assess it, for she was not thinking by any universal understanding of the word although something reptilian and vehement, something molten and primordial ravaged the stone - doing it, this little she was doing, on a large rock that had become fixed into the ground permanent and steady, herself like a standing Buddha, or the Statue of Impecunity on a pedestal of a cement slab--that it was happening here in New Orleans. Where else would she be for she had known nothing but this even briefly and had been nowhere but this dead surrogate French capital all of her life.

## Chapter Seven

It was never much more than a mood; but there were seconds when surreptitious thought would slide capriciously through her consciousness. As, in her case, consciousness did not either direct or maintain it, and without toil could not claim to possess it, this modicum of emotive logic would vanish as quickly as it arose. And before its dispersal, she would wince and recoil as though thought itself (not the worm which, a few hours ago she had allowed to slither unhindered some moments between sandal and foot) was repugnant. Once, in this generation and wincing from, if not eschewing, thought, it was of the memory of accompanying her mother to the cemetery as they had so many times before, and the corollary of how peculiar it was that the cemetery that they had visited monthly since the death of Scoliosis should need to claim one more - how odd it was that in these myriad times of witnessing something like this that her mother should now be a participant instead of a mere spectator, and that like others interred in pits and under tombstones, she should cease to be. It was as if in seeing animals at the zoo repeatedly over

the course of time, one could be transferred into a cage of her own, and it was indeed odd and a source of consternation. The decompositions beneath the etchings of tombstones had once been individuals of mental and physical celerity who also thought that by their own superfluous movements, no different than the universe itself, their existences would somehow go on and that the meanings found in being born, transcending childhood, and breeding, were eternal presences. And yet everyday people were effaced from the planet, almost all of them entirely forgotten within a few scores of revolutions around the sun; but to exist and for a time to thrive as though they were the exception, the eternal aberration, repudiation of death was needed, even if the same last names of deceased relatives, grooves engraved in stone traced with the movement of finger tips, suggested their eventual end. Composed or decomposed, all was temporarily cooled and coalesced matter that would sizzle with the rest of space when the sun at last became a supernova. Creatures of now continued in denial, pretending in every moment that their self-created agenda had some everlasting meaning. But to her meaning was in self-immolation; and if she were not as withdrawn as she was, her need to be the damp rotting leaves, or to liquidize the deficit of this deficient life, would cause her to slit a wrist with a sharpened stick or drown herself in the bayou.

The past dissipating as a jet stream behind this unremitting thrust forward, this made it all the more disconcerting, and perhaps even startling, to sense him staring at her from behind. Turning around, she saw Scoliosis standing in the trails of mist. His face, which was no longer square, looked unctuous in perspiration, and he was much older, as he was now a man.

“Scoliosis, it is you, isn’t it? But you’re different—older.”

“Yes. Who else would I be? And why would I look anything else but older? I am your older brother after all, aren’t I?”

“You are alive. Please tell me that you are. Maybe it was my derangement when living on the streets that made me think, mistakenly, that you had died so early into my life. Maybe it was derangement on the streets that made me think that I had been uneducated and kept away in the home like a servant, never seeing hardly anyone, Scoliosis, until Father passed away and Mother needed to have me get a job. And, I did, Scoliosis. I got a job at Burger King. I think I was doing okay for a while. They even had me do extra shifts—before I got fired, that is. Oh, how wonderful that I was wrong about you being dead. I’m sorry that I haven’t been there for you all this time, but at least you are alive. And if I can be mistaken here, maybe I was mistaken about being molested by Father. I remember always telling myself that it really did happen as everyone around me was acting the part as though it hadn’t happened; but it is possible that it didn’t happen. Anything is possible, right? It could just be my derangement, couldn’t it? What a relief, really. I think he’s dead, Scoliosis. She is dead too. I am almost certain of it—certain that it’s all gone. Family’s gone for us, Scoliosis. At least I think it is. I think that I am not thinking so well, today. If I did not understand that you were alive all this time because I was mad, please forgive me. Just look at you: a man, and all, and able to walk around. There must not have been any botched spinal cord surgery, either, just botched memory; but none of that matters, does it? -- just that we can be with each other now and forever.”

“Forever, Kenyon? Where did you learn such an absurd word?”

“Absurd?”

“It doesn’t match anything in this type of reality, Kenyon. Maybe you have been listening to too many love songs.”

“Too many songs, Scoliosis? You know me, don’t you? You are the only person who ever has.”

“Tuning out the world with radio and earphones just like before in the hope of finding something grander.”

“Yes.”

“But there isn’t, Kenyon. There isn’t anything grander. The poor have to be used by the rich. Innocence needs to be denuded and deflowered by the filthy. Culture and progress have to be made on the backs of laborers. Handsome policemen have to keep their wilting, invalid wives locked up in apartments with no televisions or telephones. They mustn’t be embarrassed. Can’t you see that? Yes, you love love songs and that feeling of heart macerated and put into the mold of a lover’s life. Did you ever fall in love Kenyon? Did you ever get that specious feeling from your own personal experiences that made you think that you were reborn and that forever would begin with a lover in your life?” She could see that Scoliosis was hungering for her the way he used to hunger for hamburgers, and she wondered if it was him all along who had molested her and not her father at all.

“Oh, then it is so. Are you just a figment of my imagination, and the real you ceased long ago?”

“I am afraid so, Kenyon.” His lascivious ended, but so did the steadiness and certainty of his presence. Still the conversation continued with this more sensitive and benign partial-entity that was before her.

“I don’t like the world, Scoliosis. There are beggars and psychotics, throwaways of life everywhere and rich men driving around everywhere in limousines — I see them from the streets; there is death, Scoliosis, there is you who was never given a chance to live very long. I want to leave it. I want to leave the world and come to you.”

“Baby sister, there is no spiritual realm. If there was, I would have come back for you long ago—taken you by the hand like I did before. And just think. If we were able to join our deceased loved ones in parting, they would be there with their earlier and later families too, and they with theirs, and the heavens would be overpopulated, souls competing, stealing, and killing for resources just like on Earth.”

“Like always, I don’t understand what you say very much of the time, Scoliosis, even though I know it sounds important and intelligent. I am younger and not so bright. You talk over my head. But I do know it is you. I am so glad that you have come back to me. Please tell me that you won’t leave me again. I am all alone, Scoliosis. I walk the streets with my bags of laundry. I turn different directions in the streets for no reason, no different than a leaf blowing, even though I’m not blown by winds but by these jumbled impulses inside.” Then Scoliosis evaporated quickly, like the glistening residue on the greenery around her, and Kenyon was afraid.

## Chapter Eight

Before this long series of hours in the bayou, there had been a much longer trail of this travail of ongoing grief. It was in fact three long, horrendous weeks of grief, vertiginous and wrestling of consciousness, accompanied by a malaise that made extricating herself from it nearly impossible. The foreclosure notice had come less than a month before her mother died, and the legal mandate that she leave occurred just a few days after her death. Still, despite it all, a couple months ago, homeless as she was then too, she was more punctilious then than now - fine if one cared to call it such. At least she was mechanical and functional enough in little things: she got up immediately when all the lights came on, their glare aggravating the din and clamour of easily prodded individuals and the grumbling of all others, their writhing bodies and faces often for some seconds newly interred into their sheets as though to repudiate the inevitability of their garish riddance, and went to take a shower when her number was called, feigning a smile and diffidence before the bathroom sentinels (the guards seeking power over their humble subjects and wanting to control their every step in the shelter-- where they could stand or sit, in and out of the bathroom, with the bathroom, the TV room which was often the TB testing room, and their bunks the only areas they were allowed-- and how many minutes they were to be there). Having remembered to have brushed her teeth, combed her hair, cleaned the sink with a sponge and then a paper towel, and to have kept it all under the ten minute mandate needed to keep her bed reserved at the shelter, and, on laundry days, having requested the removal of her large bag of dirty laundry and her allotment of Laundromat tokens and detergent, she would stand in line for her edible slop of fodder in its take-away Styrofoam cups, and then blow away with the sail of her bag pushing her this way or that, or more in the realm of volition, in seeking to distance herself from roaring traffic and police whistles, before reclaiming her bed once again. Void as it was, it was a life based upon leaving and losing to return once again for sleep that would restore some of the requisite energy from which to leave and lose oneself once again. It was life denuded of pretentious claims of objective and purpose, and mirrored as it really was.

Now, with the beginning of another new day in which they would soon be told to disperse the way she was already dispersed, her vessel foundering somewhere in these depths far away from sheltered shores, she longed for thirty or more backward revolutions of the sun. Such a time would have found her dressed in her finest clothes, pigtails flopping with her mother’s thumping into the aisle of pews on a Sunday morning, her right Navaho hand resting in the hand of her mother, her left Navaho hand in the hand of Scoliosis, and once seated in the pew, safely and lovingly flanked between them both. The past dissipating with means to return to it obliterated, one would proceed nonetheless feigning the certainty of the present moment while in fact knowing its impermanence. Such was normal deportment punctiliously observed, and she was not altogether inhuman.

For the most part, while for whatever underlying reasons, randomly exuding a few tears in the most inopportune times, she had been functional enough through this period of grief and change, rarely remembering anything further back than when she

was living alone with her mother - the two surviving on her deceased father's pension, widows' benefits, and small investments, cooking jambalaya among other dishes, potting plants, straightening the nest, the usual domesticity, with the memory of her mother's obdurate and insensitive neutrality while she was abused in those early years, no longer tacit and ineffable accusations or baneful, stale attitudes in the subconscious, but recriminated as calumny fabricated by the imagination. When she fondly thought of the two of them doing simple housework together, her face showed agitated consternation. And sometimes she could even be heard crying out for her mother on those startled awakenings when all those myriad lights on the high ceiling were turned on at the shelter, and all the pigs were told to get up - her voice, however, too muted a murmur to be perceived as anything but one more moan at having to wake up in this manner.

## Chapter Nine

Something happened. What was it? It was not a large happening as that exhausting day when she forced herself to go to her father's funeral, partially contriving a lachrymose veneer from a countenance of sculpted stone, and partly from taking on her mother's sadness; or when, years later, she had to bend over the broken down washer and dryer that were stored in the small attic, and watch, from a window as the furniture from the lower floor of the house burst out into the backyard with the flood water of Hurricane Katrina, the two of them praying their Hail Marys to whatever higher compassionate or wrathful creature it was that had deemed the stormy destruction of New Orleans necessary. As much of that furniture was from her father's den, the tempest had been, for all its destruction and residual sediment, a cleansing agent. It was not large emotion from small happenings, as when flipping hamburgers on a grill at Burger King, fettered by the need for money and assailed by sentiment. During those times she felt the overwhelming urge to flee back home to take care of her mother who was then sick in bed with breast cancer, and each moment was a struggle of ambivalence between physical and emotional sustenance. Nor was it like that time of embarrassment and dismay, and then humiliation and consternation, that this accident was causation of her dismissal: squeegee in hand, going up and down on the windows from outside the restaurant, how could she have known that her brassier straps would break with undergarment plummeting humiliatingly through the blouse of her burger-uniform to the sidewalk below, and that malingering, not the work ethic at all, would have been more in the interest of all concerned on this particular occasion. Virtues never guaranteed favorable outcomes since all was governed by chance. If fate had gone against her, how could she have expected anything else? When all other things were in active rebellion against her, why wouldn't clothes also rebel to free themselves from this ruined, incompetent being, this denuded and stupefied mortification? The firing, the funeral, the foreclosure on the house, the forfeiture of any life beyond the streets, and yet she had managed to buoy feebly and not yet perish absolutely in the inundations of tragedy.

No, it was the small, the seemingly insignificant, that would capsize a being. More than five hours ago something happened. Something foundered her into this inward abyss. What was it? In a lower realm of consciousness latent and unfamiliar to her, she tried to remember. So much effort dragged in nothing. But at last she knew. Hours ago she had change from her food stamp coupons, and the continual feeling of it in the pocket of her jacket eventually caused appetite and the need to have, to own, and thus to be human, to surge within her. As it was only change, a pittance in the pit of a pocket, there was little that she could buy outside of junk-food, non-essential viands. But the yearning swelled in her mouth like a tide. The appetite, which was triggered by the cold feel of coins against her finger tips, led to the corollary of memory of the two of them shopping in supermarkets together; and the tangibility of the money invoked a presence, a phantom, more palpable than memory, making her wonder if she had misconstrued going away as dying. She was even numb back then, and so life's events had sometimes been incoherent if not entirely inscrutable. The coffin interred into the ground could have been that of someone else. It was not entirely impossible.

## Chapter Ten

It had been for the need to once again sense ice cream melting into the gullet, cooling the shaft, ice cream that her deceased mother used to get for her, that she had gone to that convenience store. Ersatz that this experience would have to be



when bereft of the mother's presence, still such artificial experiences could be hers when she paid for them with loose change in her pockets. She had walked there, sinuously, timidly, through all the traffic. In their cars they always advanced—those sagacious beings, which by the affluence of their families and the education that could be purchased by such monopolies of money bred into larger amounts, were reshaped into an entirely different species. They, with their exhaust fumes that they dispelled onto her, passed her by. Even the numerous disenfranchised like her would be nothing to them but blight if they considered them at all in their pursuit to be more. But then there was little reason to consider them, or to lament chimpanzees swinging from a lower branch.

Staffed at times by various illegal workers, some who were sallow and blanched as Asianic angels, some dark brown as toasted burritos, in part the store catered toward the Asian community where, among more traditional American products, one could find kimchee or seaweed flavored potato chips, rice crackers, sushi, and ginseng flavored tea. Seeing him there, the titillation that she experienced may well have been love at first sight. Certainly, as she had no real knowledge of this convenience store worker to give any validity to her sentiments, it was indeed love. What miniscule knowledge she did possess did not cast a favorable impression of him at all: his ordering of the female cashier to stoop and obtain Marlborough cigarettes, and his delight at knowing that someone had seen his lecherous motivations in asking her to bend in this manner. His gloating over his superiority over the female form, repugnant as it was, was immensely appealing, immensely alluring, as the vilest rot produced the sweetest stench. The reasons for loving him, self-centered motivations that they were, did not matter. No matter if one was a homeless wench or the princess of Monaco, a human being needed to be confirmed to exist by the presence of other human beings. Chocolate and strawberry ice-cream of the sort her mother still bought for her a year before her death, would, she had thought then, bring her some moments of mental repose to shield her against the repeated taunting thought of her probable death which, weeks ago, ached in her brain with futility and repetition. And being in the presence of this beautiful man grinning at her, validating her existence for a time, made her feel not only exhilaration and repose, but hope that he would validate her always. But even then, she knew that ice cream could not resurrect the presence of her mother, and a homeless woman numbed by the streets and incapable of substantive interaction was not a marital prospect for anyone who was lovely and lovable. And this knowledge made her want to drown herself in the bayou; and she would have done so if she could have slipped in like a water monitor without causing a ripple in such a placid realm.

### Koan III

#### Chapter One

Top soil peeled, scathed, by wind; the shed skin sifted into smaller grain and scurried away as one amorphous fog; revealed is the partially devoured corpses of an old ladybug and gentlemanbug underneath. Hadn't they gotten together in youth to formulate second families that would bury the first in layers of forgetfulness? Hadn't they neglected to consider that in times of great drought they could become the viand of offspring?

"Hey, what are you doing out here?" It was a man's voice.

She was partially asleep, as she was partially alive, so withdrawn, so interred into the void of a self that had once been convinced of its substance, and became cognizant of the question only when the speaker cleared his throat.

"Hey!" He spoke again with this duplicate interjection, more vituperative than before. It was as though an abrupt monosyllabic utterance could pick up the indolent presence as forklift to crate. It even made her, this vacuous dross that would not even be tossed into the back of a sanitation truck to be compacted, feel like it was substantive enough that it could be seen.

“H-e-y!”

She reeled from the word, not thinking it as poking and shaking to determine whether or not she was still alive-- an oral substitute for a gesture that did what the hand should have done of her body notwithstanding how filthy and fetid the mental and physical decomposition was. Any miniscule interaction, any words that might slightly revile, would give substance to the adumbration rather than belittle it; so the tremulous shadow, execrable and untouchable, could not take umbrage at words trenchantly drilling through her skull, for they were the insertion releasing her from ponderous solitude and grief that, in the pressure of being homeless and in her physical torpor, oppressed her like cerebral bleeding from a concussion.

It was a human voice, a probing probity with, perhaps, a genuine concern for her welfare, a voice specifically directed at her -- she who had not been spoken to for so long except by shelter staff monitors with their strident voices mandating daily that they all awaken. But the presence which had spoken, steady as it was in the garish sunlight, wavered in the reality of its essence, and behind it Kenyon kept imagining the girl with the cookie dough ice cream and the large waffle cone performing pantomime among the trees (a hurricane; a man, once a plumber, but now a police officer; a woman, her gestures implied, who was captive; a woman with a type of scoliosis; an ugly, deteriorating condition from a congenital anomaly; a blotched surgery on the spinal cord and these morphine injections inducing a strange and deep sleep) but she did know that the girl was merely the substance of a dream. It was a human voice specifically directed at her—she who had not been spoken to for so long except by those shelter monitors who turned on the lights at 6:00am sharp, their words never directed at her per se, and thundered superciliously to compel the exodus of the masses.

## Chapter Two

She did not know what to say. It was as those times at the window at the counter of the shelter, when necessity compelled her to essay some type of utterance from shards and debris of imploded being. Fragmented self nearly mute from such a lengthy withdrawal, it was surprising that sound even came at all: a demure slurring together of some request for Laundromat tokens and the return of her bag of dirty laundry, with the attendant writing down her identification number, mumbling it without much more than a glance at the human form before him, and quite often not even this. During those times she began to doubt that beyond the typical call to the culled herd of human swine, she would ever hear a voice directed at her, and was beginning to notice a numbness of loosened attachment of mind and body in a cold, visceral rush. In such moments, hours even, this fading away was not like of a creature anesthetized, but more like a drowning wick of that votive candle under the framed Navajo sand painting of her great grandmother in her mother's vestibule—sinking in its blood as her great grandmother sank in the spiritual malaise of imbibing her black drink.

Specious self: it was an illusion of rock that when not acknowledged as an entity, sank in deluge like tiny grains of sand under a wave. So what could she say—she who had not heard her name for so long, heard it, yes, but in the voice of a stranger whom her senses had registered unobtrusively, the echo distorting in the brain waves when the psyche was desperate for acknowledgement. She opened her eyes fully. A police officer was to her left. A man near some type of fishing craft was to her right. And a water-monitor half the size of a fully grown alligator scurried fearfully through the grass with a bird in its mouth and into the quietude of waters, visible to her but invisible to these human invaders. Seeing the frightened creature before her, she knew that attack and retreat were ubiquitous just as the avaricious exploits of the affluent were, or even the homeless who competed with cups in their hands, bodies often on and under overpasses, tenuous, and impermanent creatures as they were. The totality of comfort for a man divided equally by six billion would be a small unfurnished garret indeed, and divided among myriad entities of all the species on the planet it would be scarcely more than the area traversed by a worm in a single day. Each sought to shore up its life and to garner all that would sustain it comfortably; so why wouldn't one consider only oneself with life being as brief as it was, especially when the only life that one was given happened just once? She did not think, but felt dully, these impressions.

Watching the last of the tiny ripples caused by the water monitor, she must have known that someone was speaking to her; but at the same time it seemed impossible that anyone should see, let alone discourse with a translucent adumbration such as her so lacking in material substance was she: the patch of air, dust, and the ripple of water had once been something--something much less than a woman, her parent's daughter, but still something. The specious supposition that one was material substance, an

imperative illusion for sanity, could only be had in interaction; and the last time a person had interacted with her, if it could be called interaction, was in the food line of the parking lot of the shelter when that black bushman of previous sexual trysts had called her a bitch for avoiding him for a period of days. A week earlier, a Latina bunkmate had also used this pejorative, even if that time it had been done facetiously.

### Chapter Three

“Gringa Bitch Inocente, tu quieres los hombres tambien” she had said, or, an equivalent of this based on Kenyon’s memories of such incidents [memories predicated on dreams predicated on diminished memories]. “Es los hombres, tu quieres: papas viejos, papas ricos, papas muchos—men, rich old men, as only these bastardos have money, tiene dinero. Es verdad? But to me you have fear to tell the truth to, too. To me, the one friend, you don’t say nothing. But one day you gonna look down at the hole, alli, and know mujers sell what nature give them as natural as dog barks. Arizonans sell tourist tickets to see Canyon Grande, so why can’t Loo-easy women sell canyons pococito between the legs when it is good chance, good to do. Mas sensible, tambien. Gotta survive somehow and gotta be occupied in some prostitution or another or your mind slips from you. Doggies and bitches all gotta get recognition in the group. And this here is lesser whoredom. I own what’s down here. Nobody owns Canyon Grande even if they sell the tickets for Canyon Grande—Canyon Pococito too if lured in by a pimp and auri sacra fames.” She remembered this dithering bunkmate, this rare voice that had spoken to her at the inception of her homelessness, this one who used to speak with a sardonic grin and then a cackle, intrigued by the making of her own clever crudities in the mezcla of two poorly learned languages. Was it the selling of herself that they had abhorred so much or the fact that she was perennially, and inexorably loud and crude while in those tight fitting clothes of hers with no bra? Yes, the answer was as apparent as the emaciated dog, too weak and sick to scavenge for food, that nature stomped the weak into oblivion and allowed the rich and strong to flourish. She might have been a vestal virgin for what they knew, and the demure timid thing then sleeping beneath her, herself, maybe an AIDS or baby carrier for what they knew, they never would have perceived to be one who gluttonously feasted on black lollipops. It was image that mattered in this world that was erroneously copied from an idea as though the laborer, God, were high, drunk, or simply inept at executing the material content after drafting the plan. No, the homeless facilitators, facilitating homelessness, were not interested in anything more than this superficiality, for in tapping into the inward heart they would find a convolution of desire and fear that would be too much like them, too cognate to successfully repudiate, too much an indictment of all. Being what she and all were externally, she was contraband goods, and soon, a few weeks into Kenyon’s arrival, she, in the tenure of homelessness, was evicted, and the new dilettante replacement was a psychotic bunkmate who murmured secret information by moans, sighs, and facial twitches.

Like any woman, she yearned for love, but she did not believe that it would deign to come to her in her lowly state. And as for secondary yearnings, it was not carnal pleasure that she sought, nor was it intellectual pleasure, which was predicated upon an education and curiosity that, in her complacent home life with her mother seeking continual rearrangements and refurbishing of the nest, and all having to coexist and become the environment in which they were ensconced, she lacked. Instead, she sought to be merged with nature: a dancing shadow of the trees glittering as a diamond does in the light. She kept imagining emaciated stay dogs running in one direction along the bayou, getting confused, and then running a different way. She kept thinking that she heard them howling plaintively and herself saying, “Baby dog, it will be all right.” It was her ministry, her vocation in life, to release them from the angst of their malediction so as to be released of her own. When there were no dogs, the mind conjured animated images of dogs, and when there was no ministry there was some slight solace to be found in the fact that such service, unlike a job, was dependent only on slight exterior factors. As it only required a dog that was willing to be scratched behind the ears, and one that found her voice more harmonious than strident, it was a dream that she could fulfill. When a fly landed on the palm of her hand she did not want to wave it off but to be at one with it just as a few days after moving out of the family house, staying in cheap hotel rooms until the last of her money ran out, applying at businesses near various Catholic churches, hoping for God to grant her economic stability and material continuum of sustenance of flesh and even purpose as a mechanical function, and taking brief afternoon naps in those flea ridden hotels, she would allow flies to buzz around her head and land on her face without turning her pillowed head to get them off.

## Chapter Four

She knew that a man's voice had spoken to her, or some type of her that should have had some connection to this languorous body propped uncomfortably against the ridged bark of a tree and this rarefied consciousness, often attributed or imputed to a soul or ghost upon one's demise, which billowed away from physical domain into some type of ethereal malaise or nightmarish dream as repugnant as reality, but much more surreal. However, unlike a voice seeming as a distant bell to a self preoccupied with its own onerous thoughts, this voice was quite distinct, and unlike the recipient too preoccupied to register the sound, it was the sound that she registered, and it was the self that she could scarcely sense at all.

Nature, including a caterpillar, a southern pine beetle, and a red shouldered stink bug traversed on her body most intimately. She was their mountains, their valleys, their rivers, their sinkholes. And there, on her, she heard one say to another, although she was not sure which was the speaker, "Don't jump. Don't end your life because of them," said one bug to the other. "The world is full of stink flies that judge without really knowing, and make pronouncements of success and failure, usually the latter, so as to have something to talk about to the others. Please, ne sauter de la falaise. Not because of them. They don't really know you. Forget them like the sting of dust in one's eyes." She, a ghost, if there were ghosts, if a ghost were more than an empty abstraction made in societies upon perennially seeing ghastly hair and skin of the frail and hoary elderly ready to exit the domain of the living for the less intricate but still animate domain of bare elements, could hardly touch, let alone toss off the insects any more than she had been able, many weeks earlier, immediately after the foreclosure, to throw off a squalid dog that she had seen wandering around the crevices between a store and a mosque that happened, to scramble onto her feet, and then onto her body as she squatted down to touch it. She, then a believer in deliverers and deliverance, wanted to part with it as it infringed on her goals to walk near any church, synagogue, or mosque that she could find in downtown New Orleans in the hope of stumbling across some religious person, some instrument of God, who might say, "Hey you, walker, I need one like you as my employee;" but as the puppy seemed to need to feel secure resting on her, she stayed with it for hours until it finally wandered off. Throughout her time with this dog she did not want to think of it as it was, the offspring of a bitch's rape. She did not want to think of it as anything but the rejuvenation of life even though clearly like its mother, it would become emaciated on the streets, lose its fur, become sick from consuming decomposing trash, and worn away by litters of pups which would drain away sustenance from its loose teats. She wanted to believe that the world was a good place: of clouds that were blown in winds and became her, of creatures that were important for being rather than doing, and of vocation to be had in mingling with lower disenfranchised creatures, and in this vocation an opportunity to shore up the beautiful-ugly and fragile against the barrage of that which was material and vile. A job was drudgery, not a vocation. It relegated one to live for the servitude of the pleasures of others, so as such, there was not a second in which to be immersed in life. Transience was a vocation. It was an immersion into the elements and the present moment, even if it made one suffer from hunger, made one dispossessed and become blight to eyes which would turn askance reflexively, and made one feel numbness as insidious as cancer.

For a second she felt as though she were in the family home and imagined herself with a favorite Barbie doll in her arms. What she once was then and what she was now were so far asunder that, in a few seconds of considering it, it was as though, being herself once again, she found herself abducted by aliens and transported to another galaxy, only the strangeness was within and not without, and the eerie and alien aspect of it all was not in losing what she was a day ago but the sense of being ineluctably entrenched for a long time in something that should never have been her. And of this discomfiting geriatric, interstellar tide transporting her into antithetical aspects of self that at her age she should not yet be experiencing, it only lasted a few moments, and as much as it was not wanted, it was the only trip a homeless person ever took.

She once again turned and saw these two men — one a uniformed police officer and the other in casual clothes and a jean jacket. The latter had moved closer to her, away from his small fishing boat which was tied to one of the trees that was partially submerged in this filthy bath. She wondered about this person that was macrocosm of the voice. She imagined he might be berating her for endangering herself here. If so, there was so much compassion in the world that there was even a little left over which could exude onto her, excoriating as the tone might be, from a stranger — a stranger, who despite her insignificance, was interested in her plight. A wave of love for him, an inundation, a light wave, a refulgence personal and warm, came down upon her, and she felt that this experiment of life was indeed good, and should not be halted or interfered with with a rain of nuclear bombs cleansing away all this selfish dross, both the inexorable haves and vulnerable have-nots, who given the right circumstances would be merciless and inexorable pariah capitalists too. Gentle in temperament, pusillanimous in her condition of

continual loss, a-thirst as she was for some human interaction that might confirm her, and eager as she was for some degree of succor, it would not have occurred to her that she should resent this choleric reproach on her life which was, after all, hers to maintain or dispose of as she wished.

It was a different insect, similar to the one that had killed its parents--one she seemed to sense that was a friend of his, which seemed to be staring into her face. Like her, it too was lost, like the howling dog along the Mississippi river bank that ran in one direction, and then turned and went into the other direction, having no destiny and suffering bouts of insanity making it obtuse even to instinctual hungers that might provide it with various modes of being. It was deranged, but some of its more lucid thoughts were exigible to her empathic consciousness. And she did sense them: that he was brought up on the farm in a one room stilted cabin, the parents surviving on some type of barter; that the father paid for his tuition by giving the school some lumber; that he spent evenings after school feeding the water buffalo, plowing with it on the weekends; that his growth and the years and the parents exhorted, implored, mandated that he leave the home to find money--the jobs on such low wages catering to the pleasures of the rich (the convenience store job, the job as a bellboy at a hotel until a customer with his sexual proclivities followed him around everywhere in the hotel, causing the employer to fire him; the hotel in Baton Rouge, but homesick, returning to the farm only to be hit by an out of control motorcyclist on methamphetamines; the long period in the hospital; the parents selling part of the farm to pay those exorbitant bills; the recuperation in which mother and father fed him and helped him to the shower; the execrable, exigible forces that pushed him back to New Orleans to find part-time work at McDonald's and Shoney's, but less working hours causing him to wind up homeless, and homelessness making him unfit to work, and all of that pain in all the metal running through his legs. Pain made one different. It contorted a being. It upended the soul.

She had not seen any alligator all this time or in any other of her other visits here -- here where, in brief excursions, nature, her companion, for all of the largesse of mosquito bites it bestowed, never censored her. Through silence and through the vastness of it all, this force, deaf and mute, deft in what were for the most part harmonious graces, amplified and supported her thoughts no matter what they were -- nature being the only visible manifestation of Him, and He that was worshiped being nature. And when asleep in the bayou -- and she had only been asleep for a half hour or less -- there was probably a greater chance of an individual being raped and dismembered by one of her own kind most naturally than attacked by nature. Quicker and smaller than an alligator, a water monitor might bite her with its mouth rife with bacteria, but it was not capable of effectuating any real virulence. That was human society's domain: much more virulent than the worst of animal life. Squeegee in hand against a Burger King window, thinking continually of her mother who was bed-ridden and emaciated in her fight with cancer, bra strap breaking, and undergarment falling through her burger king blouse and onto the sidewalk, oh how the pedestrians guffawed. Oh how they enjoyed condemning her degradation. Society did worse things to one than the worst physical mauling.

Was she at last thinking? She was despite not wanting to be. Was she aware of her hunger pangs? She was, for she was, more or less, thinking and all thoughts were raw emotions fed by rawer appetites. She imagined her mother alive and placing into the oven hotdogs on bread pinched by finger tips and secured with toothpicks, that which her mother called porc dans une couverture (pigs in a blanket), and she hungered for some now for she missed her, the departed. She missed her and the family cat that used to scratch at the screen door and cling to it when it was cold and wanted in as she, Degenerative Scoliosis (DS as they sometimes called him lovingly), and her parents would play Monopoly on cold winter weekends with Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" or some other mellifluous and melancholic harmony emanating from the stereo, and she even missed those family outings in her twenties on the Mississippi River with the monster steering through the inundations, his eyes, from the rear view mirror looking onto his bathing-suited doll most lecherously, hand tilting the tip of his cup of coffee to his lips most concupiscently.

No, it was not all bad, which was the worst of it for, in the bitter sweet or the sweetly bitter, the soul yearned to return to the torture from whence it came. Strange as it was, the truth, that which was and not what one wished it to be, was that there was some pleasure to be had in these acts of molestation. Perpetrated on her as they were, they had their sensual charm when mental degradation and the pain of the intrusion were blocked out. Surely she could admit this. Lack of volition might dull pleasure but, unremittingly, there it was nonetheless, inviting the unwitting beast to come into its easily cherished, hedonistic realm. Maybe she wanted the return of her parents so that she might be molested by her father once again. No, not really, or if it were true, it was only nominally true. She wanted them back, her feelings affirmed, because they were all she knew.

Sentiment was desperately draped from her head like a dark silk veil of mourning hanging closely against her face. Would clinging to that which was precious in the miserable past either bring about the reoccurrence of such scattered incidents or bring a

chance to do it all again, but more successfully with the balm of those memories? It would not; and she would have given anything for the complete, unequivocal respite of forgetfulness from distant and dissipated, but still formidable, memory. Family had seemed so perennial; and just as her stalwart grandfather went on and on in omnipotence until there was a sudden closure of it all, farm land auctioned off in various sections upon his death, so it was that that which was so firmly embedded in human memory could only manifest vague and brief impressions, stunted, imaginative replicas of what once was. It would never do justice to what would never come again, and its generalized sensations of pain remained a lifelong travail.

As there was compassion, why had she not gravitated toward it earlier instead of toward these adumbrated encounters with mosquitoes and marsh, or days earlier, encounters with a black man under a bush in the greenery that partitioned a highway?, she half-wondered. Oh, her brain interposed, this is now and not then, the officer is now, the black man is then. With her mother's death, not only had there been a pit in the ground, but a pit in memory, with distinguishing the present from the past an ever increasing chore. As vacuity of mind opened simultaneously, so, from the pit of the interred, like an ascending ghost, came the realization of the absurdity in which her life floundered. She had sacrificed the prospect of having a family of her own for the solidity of parents and their approbations--parents, now dead, and the idea of them having lived at all becoming increasingly more liquidated and dubious.

The mind only believed in the tangible and the empirical and decomposing bodies under the ground, at certain moments, seemed to be neither. Mail would eventually stop, she knew. It would stop coming in her mother's name just as it had in the case of her father (not that anything at all could be forwarded this far into the descent of homelessness any more than she were capable of getting a postcard from her father in hell, if he was capable of writing one), and, as strange and unfathomable as it was, she knew that soon no one would ever mention them again. She could have gotten married and made a vow to another in which both would care for each other and make somewhat satiable those hungers for taste and touch, the fulfillment of form, which was to be gotten from the entwinement of human flesh. But then, if she had done so how would the admonishment to respect her elders, a rule reiterated to her time and time again in her girlhood, have merit? But then, did it have to have any merit at all? Were the ideas spoon-fed to children to have any applicability beyond manipulating the particular behavior of a child? Were they anything more than the wish to stifle expression, as insolent as it sometimes was, and to interject the folly of asking questions to obfuscate when not having the answers? But then, if parents did not have answers, as operator manuals were not attached to the necks of babies, then man was not an evolving creature but just a statue of "being" shaped in dung and misshaped scoliosisly in inclement time. Even so, they were family, and being in their company, she had been needed in one respect or another. Thus, back then, she had been of consequence, loved rightly or perversely, but loved, and youthful rebellion would have contravened the precept of filial respect, and even more, would have been a mockery of those who authored her existence.

Like a child told to stay in her chair, she remained through the years of adulthood immobile, choosing this stability rather than leaving by the door of impudence and uncertainty; but as with all stable things, her parents too were vexed with the malediction of impermanence. Had she been one more in the millennia bungee jumping into the absurd thrill of life instead of misconstruing it as a grave one time experiment which it was not, especially after father had initiated impaling her with penile knavery, she might have even become wise. Fairy tales of knight in shining armor fully debunked by her present age and status not conducive to marriage, still there was sex. And she wanted it now--that black man's body mounted into her, the ride, ever so brief, the quintessence of specious intimacy, and the groping of human flesh to stave off the darkness of impermanence with pleasure.

"What?"

"What is your name? I will ask you again. Name. Your name! Let's see some identification," said the officer who was now beside the fisherman.

When at last able to recall it, she spoke "Kenyon Dubois" as though making a declamation albeit one ever so awkward.

"Identification now!"

Kenyon stood, pulled up her loose sweat pants, and then pulled out a small purse from her bag of laundry. She strapped the purse around her shoulder in slow movements that brought about the return of traces of humanity with a feminine touch. She then gave the officer her identification card. "Louisiana ID," she said.

"Why are you out here? Don't you have any brains? There's 'gators out here," said the second man.

"Hey, poacher, Good Samaritan that you are, you'd be in real trouble if I chose to press this. Let me handle this situation if you don't mind," said the police officer. Then in conflated ideas to both, he said, "You should be glad that he saw you out here from his boat -- Hey, you, don't you have more gators to steal?"

"Okay, I'll leave," said the man. "One thing's for sure - I'm not gonna bother to help anyone ever again," he murmured.

"No, you did good in reporting this. Not in jail for it either. A very good day for you. "

The man walked to his boat, turned it on, and went away.

And there she was with an officer who was as black as the night. Now sensing his tone to be more than just ostensibly inimical, having no real concern for her plight whatsoever, she just wanted him to ravage her there among the wild beasts.

"As for you, the subject of all this, I'm not interested in arresting you either. You are free to go, but go is the operative word," said the officer. "Go as you please, and if I see you come near the bayou one more time you may wish that the gators had taken a bite out of you instead."

"I don't--" she murmured, but stopped herself.

"What?"

"I don't want to go. I get confused when I have to go someplace and I don't know where it is I am supposed to go."

"I don't give a fuck. You are going, and that is all there is to that."

"I don't know where you want me to go."

"To a library, to a park, to a shelter-- I don't care, but you are leaving," he said.

After a nodded bow and a wave of finger tips to the officer, she walked away from all this, away from the thicket of trees, and the stray, serpentine immersion of the bayou. As she did so, she pondered the unfathomable emotional void within her. This having been spoken to should have ameliorated these feelings and more. In comparison to this state of stray uselessness, this falling isolated into the abyss of the cosmos which had rendered her lower than the elements, she should have sprung into the levity of happiness that came from the acceleration of a favorable, diametrical momentum— it should have confirmed that she was more than organic debris decaying on the streets. Happiness should have ensued following the conversation until, inevitably, the self would at last compare its fate to less dismal, more vibrant, expressions of life. But they had merely revived her animated carcass of vacuity rather than saving it.

## Chapter Five

Apart from the ambulatory movements of these feet, there was little in or out of volition that could counter such a vacuous state. But there was succor in knowing that her feelings had some rational justification due to the sorry state of the world, and that there was something more logical to her state of mind than crazed sentiment alone. Nature, which should have been exclusively gentle and beautiful, was ferocious: animals having predatory instincts to gain energy and life by desensitizing awareness of what was obviously other sentient beings so that they could be processed as sumptuous viands that aggravated and then fully satiated appetites; wounds, given enough time, that were infected by parasites; air-born illnesses that came from the heavens; tornados and hurricanes unchartered, and destructive, although seeming as if rendered from the hand of God himself, saliently reiterating the unpremeditated randomness and violence of life; offspring that was conceived from organs of filth knitting into each other on the impulse of frenetic appetite; and love that was merely another of life's hungers. But things just were, and the ideal was only a fabricated compensatory measure of human ingenuity knowing the deficiencies of the world and

wishing them, nay hallucinating them, to be something other than what they were, roseate ideas and abstractions that had no relationship to the real world.

Physically yearning for the homeless black man, and wistful for recognition by the clerk or manager at the convenience store, her hungers for human beings were as indelible as those she had for water and food, which she also needed at present. She continued to walk along the edge of a road, which was not far from the boulevard, until the distant patch of skyscrapers began to grow in size and their size seemed to overtake her. At a McDonald's Restaurant she relieved herself in the bathroom, and at an abandoned table she found the remainders of a half eaten McEgg and a small soft drink, both of which she consumed voraciously. Whether any of this left-over desideratum was sapid or insipid she would not have known. With a bit of food, perspective could be remedied quickly; so less demoralized, and more self-aware, she left the restaurant and continued on her walk. The walk was not uneventful, especially for one like her who was prone to live vicariously. Adventitious happenings occurred in adjacent areas: a youth tried to break into a car on a side street, a one armed squeegee mendicant back from either the Afghan or Iraqi wars, slowed down traffic on the other side of the street most third-worldishly with his odd mixture of work ethic begging, and a frail middle aged woman with a T-shirt with Katrina Survivor on it garnered plastic bottles from the trash and inserted them into her cart. Kenyon admired the resilience and ease by which the woman could be so content with such adverse fate as to smile as she did this. Perhaps it was contrived, perhaps facilitated by the thought that the hurricane years earlier could have brought about her own physical annihilation, but there it was, this brighter deportment than her own, a virtue which she admired and told herself that she would be wise to emulate.

She tried to imagine the woman's life but the numbness of her mind would not allow for the conceptualization. She wanted to become friends with her, but when she came near her she did not know what to say, and as no words left her agape mouth, she walked on without saying anything. And she felt that she and her plight were much worse than this woman: that she was a wave of dust blown out of a crack in the sidewalk, and she regretted having winced from the prospect of drowning herself when she had the chance, of thinking, at the bayou, that she did not want to disturb the placid depth by plunging into it with her weight. Now, in retrospect, this imagining of myriad resonating ripples formulating at her disturbance of the quiescent, seemed as cowardice.

## Chapter Six

Against the ineluctable truth that no one on the planet entertained anything but the most passing of thoughts concerning her, levity to be had in this much needed human interaction would dissipate most indubitably; but, as the vanquished was not to be repudiated entirely by a being who herself was prey to hope in order to keep herself going in the forward movements of time, she, like all humans, could not afford to be subject to too many onerous realities, and thus, would not falter entirely---not when purpose could be so easily contrived.

For her, it was going to a cemetery of urban minorities and placing wild flowers on tombstones. Since becoming homeless, she had gone there at least a dozen times; and now, as the cemetery was not far from where she was at, the ghosts lingering among these plots of nondescript monuments seemed to call out for her, and so she walked toward them. On the flat chunks of rock were inscribed, among so many other names, the names of her American Indian family of Degenerative Scoliosis, her mother, Big Chiefess Lady Gaga, and the monster, Chief Fuck-- all without any types of flowers whatsoever; so she replaced what had been blown or swept away with whatever she could find, resisting the impulse to transfer superfluous flowers and wreaths from other graves to those of the dead more barren and impecunious than the rest. Gaining purpose and satisfaction of being from meaning one concocted for oneself like the dreamer of Kenyon dreams and the writer of this damnable book, was what it was all about. She would have to agree with that.

## Chapter Seven



At this cemetery she noticed how the American flag, which a few minutes earlier was blowing in one direction, now faltered in lack of wind and wilted flaccidly despite some subtle movements here and there, hither and thither, in time and space. She got some satisfaction doing this despite so many distracting thoughts upon her: of them, the dark friend and fiend whom she knew intimately, and the convenience store worker, manager or common laborer that he was of egotistical and chauvinistic dimensions, whom she hardly knew at all--a man she granted a more roseate appraisal not only to match his blanched complexion but because he had not thrust intimacies upon her (not that he would), as needy as she was of them. She knew: a touch against a woman's skin to excite her was merely for the aggrandizement of man's own excitement; her writhing body and moans at his insertion, her pleasurable pain and wanton discomfort, merely the disgorged groping of ego at subjugating a human in the only manner in which such subjugation was legal, making her, when it happened (when this hungering immolation of human flesh for this ultimate purpose of nature of the ejection of sperm took place), wish to be a child with her mother once again, coloring Easter eggs in Cherokee colors. But was volition coercion? It was in a sense, for the brain was not one but many, having evolved and evolving separately with multi-tiered prowess devolved or engendered by the influence of the inebriations of emotion or the tyrannical dictates of one or the other of these elements or a combination of many--democracy itself inculcated as the tyranny of the majority.

As she began scratching her insect bitten, fungal violated body, she thought of the fact that neither she nor her child, if she was pregnant, if she had one and he died prematurely, or if she aborted or miscarried--if aborted, miscarried, and still-born were interred in plots-- could be interred here. She would not have money to buy the little dab of land that would allow her (them if there was a they) to be buried here, which was now the permanent family home as long as a deluge of rain did not wash away plots, causing the sense of a permanent home to relocate once again; and as she did so, the verdant and floral fecundity in sight and scent among the tombstones furthered the impregnation of her with amorous feelings. And yet, as she chastened her licentious feelings in such a place, and told herself that sexuality was unrelated to the true intimacies that she sought (those were her true convictions, principled and sincere as she was), it did not stop the ebb and flow of human yearnings. Ugly and impalpable as at that moment she deemed herself to be, like the very darkness of the night, the epitome of desuetude in such a state of disarray, and with them being as much as strangers, why, she asked herself, would he, the convenience store laborer, even give her a passing thought? Their only conversation had been related to the ice cream that she had purchased from him. And as she doubted that he could ever love her, that he could rescue and restore unto her some sense of family, she noticed a piece of tenuous plastic clinging to sole of one of her shoes. No, it was not an ice cream bar wrapper, nor was it even a wrapper from his store, but it was a convenience store wrapper nonetheless of some sandwich or another, and, to her, the viand vestige gleamed of fate and destiny. At least so her womanly nature, her womanity, told her it was, even though all previous acts of destiny had been errant destinations, vacuous ghost towns of thought.

It was calm here despite circumstances that did not have to afflict her but did, and desires of the mind for something greater than subsistence, a sense of being happy and complete that was an ineluctable component of the mind, which she might suppress and even transcend with books and learning that could transport her into the objective realm of ideas, but, marginally literate as she was, did not. Unlike the simple pleasures of picking wild flowers, the smell of grasses around the soles of her feet, the feel of the morning sun on her face, the sensitivity of her neck to sun and breeze, and this sense of belonging to the macrocosm in the context of having a role in the community of the dead, such thoughts, such feelings that were their propellants, were, she knew, base and primordial, for changing men into food was like a reverse transubstantiation. They with their zippers undone were the wholly albeit oblong wafers the shapes and gestures of a standing sausages ready to take a bow. And what fetid aroma did black men have all sweet like the decay of trash flavored with a bit of urination and glazed of sweat briny and astringent. Even she knew the absurdity of launching lust, love, from the molecular stench fuel of a phallus, that seeking to see a denuded male unclothed would culminate with the appearance of a plucked chicken cadaver that was not the real viand of nourishment which she hungered for most acutely, that loving the virtue, the innocence, of another was only loving oneself mirrored from a dissembler, and that a desirable young boy, a specious palliative, with shirt sticking out of his jeans and socked and sneakered as he was, was just the yearning for youth, nonchalance, and pleasure that her Promethean parents had snatched from her, not knowing that in this fire robbery, this snuffing out of flame instead of allowing it to burn itself out, kept the embers of yearning effulgent and perennial within her.

And in the breeze that once again began to move the leaves of adjacent trees that were awnings over some older and higher tombstones less organized than the rest, she thought that she heard her name called out or proclaimed indefeasibly. And yet wind, moving rarefied air, would hardly be empowered to summon her let alone enjoin her essence throughout the land; and why with her being nothing, something less tangible than itself, would it call out for her anyway?

## Chapter eight

In addition to the itching of her body, there was the raw aching of cold sores in her mouth. Considering, ruminating on, the osculating catalyst and then onto a more aerial perspective of the whole of her life, how odd this filial loyalty seemed to her. It had taken so many tortuous and sordid turns with patriarch trespassing and violating that which in the right circumstances would have easily been his own, and then parents, as they became older and more moribund, ultimately to be vanquished to oblivion in death without a trace, making anyone without the easily effaced mental engraving of their having existed with a sense of them not having existed at all (a whole 7 billion and soon more not knowing her parents even to realize they had been alive and had died), and parental property that was appropriated by a bank and auctioned off making this pattern of living for them such a farce that in her homelessness all of it caused her to seek this writhing in unpleasant pleasantries there in her small aperture, this dark companion banging his long void within and against her. Yes, in her disheveled state, within a life of disarray, body having to be continually scratched for whatever fungi replicated therein, of course she would have cold sores as well; and with sex being one content of a fetid container spilling into another -- nay, foundering vessels of the night, of the void, seeking to be demolished into each other before sinking entirely-- it could hardly be claimed that such activity was sanitary. It was consoling to think that she was giving these deceased and decomposing chunks of liquidized matter, these elements rather than organisms, a more beautiful exterior--people, it might be argued, less fortunate than her for having died, although they, like her like them, would, if they had given it any thought, hardly escape this true calling in which all men were equal.

Still, she abandoned the corpses to head for the nearest fast food restaurant to swish hot water into her mouth and to spread liquid soap onto some of her body like a balm. In the toilet of the Jack In The Box, on a toilet seat in one of the cubicles, she called out for Degenerative Scoliosis, and in a scuba diving outfit he emerged out of the toilet bowl. "Big fish prey on little fish, and I don't want to be here anymore," she told him; and if the recurrent idea, hackneyed by a billion utterances before her plus a billion of her own seemed to him insipid by now, his countenance did not suggest it, for he understood how discountenanced she was, and he pitied her for it. "I understand," said Scoliosis. "But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of Communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth-pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development that this determines." "Yes," she said obtusely, albeit half-knowingly as though some distant alter ego, nexus to a part of herself, knew well what she did not know and could not know in her half-literate state. And there in the toilet, with the idea of the unsanitary nature of sex and its two fetid containers overtaking all other thoughts for a moment or two, fixating on her mind, Degenerative Scoliosis, D.S. as her family called him, seemed to disperse like a vapor; and if in full discourse with him she had wanted to ruminate on the nature of sex, she forgot about doing so in falling into the sinkhole of memory and forgetting about him entirely (incidents and concerns of the present always effacing that which went before). And she remembered that their first meeting had not been at the food kitchen at the shelter, as she had earlier thought, but instead, it had been at one of those alternate Sunday dinners held by a church that was part of a consortium dabbling in homeless causes. These saintly bodies who attempted to publicize their companies via their causes, helping the homeless for their own self-gratification, felt that their own lives were perfect emulations of Christ; and as their help was infrequent, the meals, for those who ate them, were like royal banquets.

"You lookin' good. I'd trade'n everythin' on the taba for a piece of-yoo. Don't she look good, better than that appa'pie on you' plate?"

"Shut up, Nigger, and allow the lady to eat," said the second one, who was darker than the first; and having said nothing more than this reproach to his friend to make her feel secure, he stared into her eyes, clasping them lecherously within his

own, and sinking his naked intentions into her orbs. But it was honest, it was intimate, and it was certainly an affirmation that she was an entity on the planet which she needed so desperately. So although his gaze alarmed her, and she tried to hide herself from his eyes, still this affirmation disintegrated her, and every few moments she would glance up at him. Once she even smiled. Confident and tacit affirmation of existing and being of interest by the agent to its object more natural than the artifice of language were the only spell that mesmerized her and her kind, and he knew it.

"Well, I can't help myself, man. She's good lookin.' You're one good lookin' bitch from where I sit," said the first, not aware of the squatter's claim.

"Shut that filthy mouth of yours, loud-mouth fucking nigger," mandated the second. "Here. Since you were eyeing this apple pie of mine, take it. I got sweeter things to concern myself with."

Suddenly, her mind adapted the memory to fantasy; and it was not a homeless dinner any longer but a dining table at the White House. And they, these same faces who had dined together in reality, knew that Kenyon Dubois, the force that had driven her negroid husband's political ambitions and had secured for him the presidency, was indeed Thomas Jefferson's love child, and as such, she had been the inheritor of a large portion of the coffers of the United States government. Only from being such an heiress had she been able to generate this success. And they commended themselves to her in a toast without butter. "To Kenyon!" they said.

"No," she remonstrated. "To my negroid husband, and his foresight in making homeless people the inheritor's of this great land."

"To President Blackman, Kenyon's husband," they all said and the toast was complete. And naked on the toilet seat, she became aware of Scoliosis looking at her quizzically.

## Chapter Nine

No, she said to D.S, as she defecated and he tightened his scuba diving gear in her cubicle to plunge once more into the toilet bowl, God does exist--or at least he did. I met him once. Black, he had this distinct ineffable odor which soon put me into a spell and caused me to follow. I don't know why. He took me to the middle of an interstate near a flaming bush. There he exhorted me to denude myself and not be ashamed in Eden. He told me dirty things--things he wanted me to do on him--his extra large cock--with my mouth. I did them and more. But before He could cum I stuck a wild mushroom in his mouth. Then he was dead. I didn't mean to. He just died. He is dead now. God is dead and, elated, then, his corpse suddenly floated into the air around me. He, the corpse of God, floats still--somewhere in the universe, but God only knows where. If it rots, if there are microorganisms in space that can cause it to rot, I know not, but, don't you think Scoliosis that a godless universe stinks?

Scoliosis scratched his head through the rubbery condom textured hood of his scuba diving uniform and thought for a moment. "Yes I do," he said, "unless it is an opportunity. Some things look bad initially but they turn out at the end to be opportunities. You don't know that. You are uneducated and not too bright. But it is true even if it does not seem so to you."

## Chapter Ten

Sitting out there on a bench in front of the Jack In The Box with back stiff, brain ever obtuse and discomfited, and the thought of eating a hamburger in its entirety predominate but sequestered in lower consciousness, she felt as adumbration needing to be conjoined to the material. As such, in part, she had to force herself to repudiate him, the eschewal, the anathema, repudiate her yearning for him, yearning for that brackish, virile scent and the affirmation of self gained in being with him--being possessed by the friend, the black fiend. In some respects, it was not so difficult. The brain having cortexes that had evolved separately, although needing to integrate enough to maintain a fairly consistent consciousness as a defense of the organism, there were regions, lobes, that would dispense with him easily enough. He was homeless like her, and she was naturally, womanly, perfidious as all things were when gravitating to a material auspices. As desirable as the burly form was, it was not so difficult to shun him for his impecuniousness, his monotonous dark shine, his lack of education, and his lackluster. Her impression of the black friend now rendered as pernicious fiend, the idea of intimacy with him seemed dark and morally reprehensible for reasons not the least of which was for the pain he had inflicted upon her by the large largesse and endowment he had inserted and thrust within her.

So, seated there, thinking for once about what she was doing, where she was going, it was no surprise to her that she had been walking ever closer to the convenience store. If only all of her movements were so forward. Instead, thought was continually pulled into the froward black hole of memory, and to family, that institution that should be nurturing and perennial but rarely ever was. And of her random thoughts seated there, one was of an emaciated three legged bitch whose lack of a limb facilitated the ease by which her offspring were able to seize upon her teats. Of course, nurturing these sodden puppies in the dirt within a breach of the foundation of an office building, there was little chance of any of them surviving for long should she discontinue nursing them. To guard and protect them, to endure having her vital essence being sucked and drained from her daily, she needed a more conducive environment. Thus, it was better for all five of them, and her as well in some respects, that one by one they were snatched from her by human hands even if the bowl of food that heretofore had been full was now left empty because she was no longer a conduit for the sustenance of youth and beauty. And that, that alone, was what they and their benevolent tender mercies exacted. Secondly, she had to admit, love was neediness; and they who had no one in their lives would invent caretakers for themselves -- the murmurings of a gust of wind that seemed to be calling her name, Kenyon, a dog that would begin to recognize her after enough times of her sharing some cracker crumbs, a convenience store worker who with enough imposed visits would begin to think of her. And thirdly, of course in getting on a cloud at the Jack in the Box and riding an aerial of the Mississippi River she found that the deluge that subjected Northern New Orleans under five feet of water and caused it to suffer from dengue fever, cholera, and typhoid was an extravaganza for the poor of the South of the city. Here countless men were fishing or over-fishing on the embankments. And looking out from the windows of the stilted cabins, and with them along the embankments, were these new fishermen-aficionados who applauded successes in reeling in larger than usual trout and thrusting up tortoises in nets. She would not have expected it any other way: that which brought sadness and death to one group would be the subject of mirth and the substance of health and sustenance for another group. That was just the way it was with circumstance and human nature causing each man to cannibalize his brother the way that it did.

Resuming her walk on this pleasant balmy morn, she reminded herself that, barred from the shelter as she no doubt was, she was somehow getting through the hours. She had even had a successful beginning of sorts witnessing a police officer express some concern for her, and placing flowers on flowerless tombstones. Not bathed, disheveled, and having had virtually no sleep, wasn't she even briefly succumbing, if not transmuting, negative memories? And what had seemed as erosion, descent, and diminution within an imploding cavern of self, or more like the swallowing of the self by the self, now, by contrast, seemed like being borne into the world again in a flowered and verdured expanse. It was a rush of jubilation in the soul like the conflation of confetti and fireworks, of a child finally able to capture impressions of the eye and mind through colored crayons and words; it was colored Easter eggs, chocolate rabbits, and resurrection, like the first glorious rays of sharp light from an open prison door--hers being the prison of the mind. It was a beautiful balmy morning.

And if people died off and were forgotten, swallowed like a piece of meat into the gullet of oblivion as though they had never existed, if the mind was besieged by the anxiety of standing on these shifting tectonic plates, companion to monstrous specters and phantasms of memory and fear, what of it? Her puny thoughts that it should be otherwise, or that if reality could not be rectified, that she should not feel any consternation at this forward motion through time and space, had no altering power. It would continue and she would feel the pangs of the repercussions until she was not able to feel at all. People came and they went. That was the way it was. They came, and when they did their will would thwart and suppress her own; thus, why should she care superfluously, and why when feeling distraught from it all, should she tell herself that she should not feel that way, which only hindered her from the grief that was her ablution. The key was not to try to thwart their impact so that one stayed unscathed but to allow the impact unimpeded without restive, indignant pride, to succumb to their will for power and when it had finished to resume being a comet whose path was chartered by the gravitation of multiple celestial bodies. If she could do this, strangers would no longer look like delectable higher entities or impediments on crowded sidewalks blocking one's way, and friends, if she had any, which she of course did not except for God, or God forbid, a bush baby growing inside her, would seem as celestial angels.

But her mind was like the inundations of the Mississippi Delta fomented in traffic, albeit the traffic of thought, and then interring into the larger Gulf of the subconscious. In the river of thought one larger wave could overtake a smaller one, thwarting it off course, and thus neither positive nor negative assertions could ever gain permanent dominance in the continual waves of coup d'état thought of the human mind. Without meaning to do so, in a small park she fell asleep in the shade of a tree like a dainty belle fainting into the arms and torso of a lover. Asleep, she dreamed that she saw a policeman rummaging through her purse and obtaining her identification.

"Doo boy?"

"Dubois."

"Okay, Dubois, Kenyon. Age late thirty-something. Married to one Chuckles-Charles something."

"Dubois."

"Of New Orleans."

"He was born here to a family of degenerative French aristocrats. We met in Florida when he was a plumber."

"What brought you back here?"

"To see that the family property was okay. And as so many had left from Hurricane Katrina, he had an opportunity to become a police officer here."

"Profession: scoliosis, according to your I.D."

"Yes."

"Which means what?"

"I am a professional scoliosiser."

"You are an Indian?"

"Yes."

"Are you on the side of the English or the French settlers?"

"Neither."

"Chuckles has issued a warrant for your house arrest on charges of high treason."

## Chapter Twelve

She slept there for over an hour, and then she suddenly woke up from a fear that a policeman or a security guard might have seen her asleep and would soon chase her out, setting her mind into confusion as to where she should go. Opening her eyes, she saw that same young girl whom she had noticed many times before along the Gulf. Here, she was eating chocolate ice cream from an outdoor vendor rather than the more specialized varieties at the delta branch of the Baskin Robins, and she judged it to be a good sign. Kenyon hungered for her youth as she hungered for the viand of the cheap phallic cone she was licking. Wistful of the girl's independence, and her own--female independence generally--, she prayed to the non-existent god that the pampered child should be allowed to meet others the way, as a child, she was not. From her own experience she judged that the pampering of love more times than not meant ownership and isolation of its object, for although the human variable was seven billion subtle considerations, for the more salient it was virtually none.

If she were young again, she thought, she would not give herself to her parents whose sole goal should have been to nurture, and not to possess, to foster independent movement, and not to cripple; but at the time it had seemed the least she could do to have complete filial respect for the authors of her existence, and to give herself to their charge. It was only at the demise of her mother that it occurred to her that adolescent or even belated post-adolescent rebellion and the tremulous circumstances that for self-preservation by all parties exacted the loosening and eventual severing of family ties was the only practical consideration in the brevity of life. It was the natural, not the ideal, course, inculcated by nature. Within hormonally crazed, fomented youth, it exhorted restructuring the self and looking forward to one's own posterity, not backward toward former families. Such was the unsentimental mood and inexorable movement of the universe. Such was the fate of man when dragged from behind.

## Chapter Thirteen

Chocolate: the man, the god, had shot vanilla ejaculate from his chocolate cone -- he was the choco-man of the triangular, verdant patch, and it was he with whom as a respite from the numb daze of walking the streets she had gone a few rounds with in the obscurity of a bush enclosure hedged from the asphalt- openness of the freeway. It was he whom, with traffic all around them, she imagined as puncturing her hymen when, even she had to have remembered, it had been punctured and ravaged in the sensual and incestuous, consensual rape of long ago. Did she love the blackened one whom she denigrated and repudiated, and by volition, wished, to some degree, to forget? She was not sure, for she did not know how to get a hold of a word that had thousands, if not millions, of fully felt and fooly defined connotations—perhaps billions with seven billion contemporaries on the planet and surely, over these 200,000 years, seven billion earlier inhabitants who no doubt, before passing, had no less viable interpretations of the word, each wanting this ambiguous concept of perennial love and not sure how to get it in acceptable accepting quantities with the lover ever-stimulating and anew to them, with extant bit unknown layers there to peel back and explore as one would unbutton that partner's articles of clothing to denude him or her in a bush.

She did not know whether the insertion of the hacker's blunt knife and being ridden with the blade due to violent passions within her for the obtainment of pleasure was indeed love. The body might love him in the sense of hungering for him, hungering for the pleasure that intimacy with him could give her, but this was specious love of the real body and not the real phantasms fabricated by the objective conjuring of the externalized mental apparatus called the "mind."

No, she just wanted to love her mother--only her--like before. She wanted to return to childhood, but a childhood in which even the adoration one had for a nurturing parent could stand like the Giza pyramids and not be razed by poor judgments, ill-

conceived circumstances, and the silent vituperative of less conscious currents of thought. A normal mind spinning around in an altering physical presence, within events and affections that moved about under one's feet like an ever shuffling deck of cards, and all on a ground of shifting tectonic plates, held desperately to a few strands of sanity. Her mental state was indubitably worse: vertiginous as in her homelessness she was. It was as though she had taken every ride at the amusement park: the Aladin, the Enterprise, the Boomerang, and the Log Ride more than a few times. She could go to the sea. Harmonious in rhythm as the waves were, it was never placid there. Swimming out to the source of energy behind the waves, she might die without disturbing the ocean whatsoever and inadvertently discover God in the process. Instead, she was walking to an unknown, a man whom she hardly knew except for the worst impressions he had made upon her, hoping that he would befriend her when no one else was.

## Chapter Fourteen

Walking to him, many were the times that she thought that she heard her mother's voice reproaching her with "Where are you going? What do you think you are doing?;" and telling her to return to the house to eat before her breakfast got cold. And hearing this voice, she would turn sharply as if in the direction of the sound, not knowing how to turn as the sound was within her head, and with each jerk of the head expecting house and mother to materialize, stunned by the disconnect between cognizance of the mutability and impermanence of all matter in form and substance and the mind's wizardry, which could cast illusions that seemed more material than matter.

And in a secondary, sanguinary delusion that it had been black men who broke her hymen, causing blood to be cast upon the face of the Earth, she began to hallucinate spills spelling out "l-i-a-r" while fire ants and sweat bees, whether attracted to blood, sweat, saliva, vestige excretions on skin, semen, or other viscous impertinences of life, stung black men as they, her natural husbands, topped her.

That infamous, glorious patch, a miniature oasis in carbon exhaust fumes with an oak tree or two and clusters of nondescript shrub, was where a homeless person could lose herself in the base self-expression of intimate indulgences so essential to those marginalized and imprisoned by lack of purpose in their lives. As she, in her obtuse manner, thought something to this effect, and suddenly began to notice that she was experiencing menstruation making her more of a mess than before, a Marxist dog and lothario, enticed by her smell, began to walk beside her, ask of her health, and then sniff where it was better to not sniff, until at last pulling itself away. "To be sure," howled the dog as it restrained its natural proclivity for lechery as well as its movements while she continued to walk on, "eating, drinking, and procreation are genuine canine functions. In abstraction, however, and separated from the remaining sphere of canine activities and turned into the final and sole ends, they are human, if not animal functions." She did not understand, and was too scared to stop moving.

Somewhere into the walk she noticed an emaciated singing collector and flattener of plastic bottles going from one trash barrel to the next, and as she did so she thought about this God, who if more than clothed in human form by human imagination, had, according to scripture, been swaddled in blankets as an infant and later pampered by mesmerized, adoring disciples. What did He know of hunger pains clawing the viscera, of loneliness suffocating one in its thick textured darkness, or fears that a live and growing African Spider Monkey could be swinging from her uterus, ready to come out and complicate her days? No, she half-thought and half-felt in undercurrents of brain activity, Christ was not her savior--only her ability to cling to the last straw of sanity in insane circumstances by refusing the forlorn self to think of itself as negligible and escape her like a vapor, allowing the mind to become the dross of an empty shell.

Just as one might imagine Mickey Mouse as God and impress this idea onto a gullible child, she could persuade herself that the two men had never been, or at least had never been part of her life, and thus they had never trespassed on her being. Just two days ago she needed to vent anger about the injustices of life onto someone. Imagining that there was no toilet paper in the restroom of the Jack in the Box when the roll really was there all along hanging like a miniature tapestry, she involved the restaurant manager in the issue. Timid as her ire was in firing upon the manager, a murmur scarcely audible, he must have thought her crazy but innocuous as he walked away from her. It was later that she tried to isolate whether wiping herself off with finger tips sodden in toilet bowl water had enough volume and substance to be called a memory, and sensed that only the ire vented onto the restaurant manager had such a palpable and weighty vestige of shame within it.

## Chapter Fifteen

And of this prurient convenience store clerk or manager, this subject of the obsession that moved her, and that she moved toward, would he even be there, wherever there was, for all her efforts to see him? It was evening when she saw him before and it was mid-morning now; so no matter which shift he worked, having left or on the verge of leaving, or still to come, he might not be there for hours, if this was indeed his day to work there at all --there, this location that was as uncertain as the luck of her groping attempts to find him. And if she did not know who he was or when she might see him, if she were to even find the store at all, it was logically nonsensical that his appearance would be equally unfixed in the mind. Was he not a pallid Korean with a beauty radiant as sunlight reflected off a hard crested snow bank?--at least, at times she remembered him as that, and it was reinforced by having seen seaweed flavored potato chips and kimchee stocked on the shelves the previous night. Did the more pallid complexion suggest honesty and sincerity not to be found in the negroid race, she asked herself repeatedly, deliberately pumping herself with emotions of optimism and hope when bereft of answers. But weren't mindless, traumatized beings like herself, individuals with the attitude that there was purpose to be had in a languorous lifestyle where the hours were scarcely sufferable eternities instead of like distant cars whizzing by on the beltway as those with work ethic and plans for carrying out myriad insurmountable pressing tasks and hasty executions saw life, or their own lives, as being, perceived as less than a race of men, a species of Neanderthal? No, she did not want to think about it.

Instead, as unrealistic as it was to imagine herself in a relationship with him, she thought: And if he were to go the ways of all promiscuous men before, a man programmed to obey his nature no different than a woman, it would not be important. Loyalty and the level of commitment in a relationship had to be assessed from a greater touchstone than a man consistently unzipping himself to only one woman. There had to be a more important measurement of love than sexual fidelity, although atavistic instincts of jealousy no doubt tried to preclude its consideration. Modern and sophisticated was the human brain, and primordial its corporeal extension. Loyalty, or "love" was to be determined simply enough from a man returning to a woman at the end of the day, caring for those within his family, but his sojourns to others on the outside for more complete fulfillment should be absolutely unhindered. Such she felt fully and thought incompletely. Such was her morality. And no different than an ultra-conservative fundamentalist or a libertine, morality was predicated on experience. Being circumscribed to the house no different than their chained dog had been her experience. And she could almost see her miniscule reflection once again in the fine shine of his polished shoes, sheaths of leather that had small tassels next to the buckle, and, inside, the rutted earthiness of his socked feet that matched the flanks of legs and the striped shirt that all convenience store workers wore.

Of course, right now, he did not know her name, and she was a mere face on a white female body that was one of many he encountered everyday. And yet, even if he deemed her a nuisance by her unwanted frequent visits, he would indubitably think of her which was better than before, and this was far better than the black man's assessment of her as a hole needing to be filled.

He, the love, rather than the lover, was capability, she, ineptness; he was buoyant material substance, she, a distraught, burdened spirit mauled by the mutability of the world. If he needed to see himself through another to appear all the more virile and masculine to himself there would be a chance of him needing her for this and for her to feel real in his presence. Thirty minutes or more went by of trying to retrace her steps within the cluster of low rise skyscrapers and suddenly there it was; or to it, here the fetid delivery had arrived, the disheveled stinking individual whose cup was filled in a concupiscent being.

## Chapter Sixteen



And what might engender a new life: a stance against the old? That would be like decrying the earth that one walked upon, the Earth that sustained existence. No, only money could engender change. Money transformed into commodities and the superfluous into security, and it was the being without material concerns that transubstantiated itself into a spiritual being. Thus, that which was called the human soul was merely successfully ransomed consciousness.

But those from families of fortune who were fortunate enough not to have ever been in the shackles of drudgery and servitude were more often than not obsessed by ever greater security and found themselves in voluntary slavery to the master, money, ever yearning for greater sums of wealth that could, they thought of their impermanence, shore up existence when on a given day a thousand different variables in man's dependence on man could annihilate it, and thankfully rarely ever did in any precipitous act. Pesticides, preservatives, and smog induced cell mutilations were very subtle, insidious acts.

She looked onto him through the window of the convenience store and at a distance. Yes, the man inside pushing his dustmop across the tiles of the floor, pausing at times with chin resting against the tip of the handle as though contemplative, but in fact, with close observation, ruminating only about sleep, was the same person she had seen before.

Slipping into her own sleep deprived haziness, her own cloud of fog, she, more or less, felt if not thought: recoiling and yet courting the framework of my fragile psychological state for safekeeping in his arms--she, yes she, seeing herself in his shoes in this fetish, this enticement and enchantment-- going to him was an absurdity, a love for he whom she did not know, who had not given her a thought after she had exited the door--leather better than plastic or rubber strip jiggling between the ebony toes of the homeless jig's cheap thongs flip flopping on his soles when they were walking to the triangular, verdant patch--but with parents dead and zipped in body bags like nature's trash, and the purpose of her maidenly virtue over these thirty and more years for their sake in question, the death of the mother made the earlier filial act such an absurdity--neighbors, friends of the family not knowing the patriarchal rumblings upon her thighs, their ideas of the family were, to put it mildly, erroneous conclusions--people of the night vanishing: superstars like the Beatles, like Michael Jackson, like John Ritter becoming supernovas, John Travolta's son gone-- a Pakistani woman butchered and cooked her husband so that he would no longer molest their daughter, a woman allowing her children to get on the ex-husband's plane to spend Thanksgiving in his home, but the plane crashing and blowing up on impact with a mountain--the whole fucking world so much liquidized substance--dogs and cats would also assume it so--all had been in doubt, and she had succumbed before the illusion of intimacy--Nuns were in the audience of a concert. "Look around you," said the older one, also with a plain grey dish towel on her head. "They are all of them ugly. Have you ever seen such a pathetic assortment of ugly birds in your life? The whole audience is that way. It should tell you something."--the black man's semen had indeed helped whitewash her from delusions of family--white pussy always such delicacy to slanted eyed as dark bug eyed, so maybe there was a chance for her with him of the convenient store--on the other hand, foul smelling and disheveled street woman that she was, she was not a regular woman, but one pulled out of a garbage bin--still, was she not to have hope--if reality was looked in the face to the skeleton one would become, the energy expended for self preservation would be life's biggest absurdities-- chronically unemployed and living on the streets where failure and loss were rife and winsome, this would only make her desirable to drug addicts and alcoholics, the play thing for homeless beings, and the like, even if she might be in a position to edify the world that there was nothing more consonant with living life fully than losing all self-importance and living in the eternity of the hours--they whose perfumed fragrance wafted pungent and delectable were as baked cinnamon to her rancid stagnation, a stagnation like the bayou itself--if she were brazen enough in a slow moving crowd of pedestrians to pass one of these illustrious and affluent entities wouldn't he or she wish to annihilate her, this homeless bug, smashing it with the heels of his or her shoes--she who could not mesh with them, nor have any inclination to do so so willfully indifferent to the human plight as they were--what am I doing stalking this man--why am I here in front of this convenience store, ugly, smelly unbathed bitch that I am-- along the Mississippi river bank the bitches elude the catchers until losing themselves, losing all bearing, and end up turning randomly and howling at nothing--as much as one needed water, she needed to belong, even remotely, to someone, or at least, if not experience, then imagine enough of a real connection to become human-- Marx says that it is in eschewing the false premise of property and accept ourselves as needy dependent creatures in society that we at last become human--her clothes, no, my clothes had rebelled against me, and now my mind seems to be doing the same thing; and why wouldn't it? Why wouldn't the best parts of her outright eschew her and repudiate ever having been associated with her--society a commercial activity, of course not being gainfully employed, being a freeloader, was a grave sin against it--Kenyon Dubois, married to a Charles Patrick Dubois; according to Orlando Florida police records you ran away from parents, a native Indian family, when you were fifteen, and the New Orleans police office knows this fact as we inquired about you and found a missing person's report filed in the Orlando office; Miami Records show that at seventeen you were married briefly to a Robert Karl Baker, and although tax records show him working at a Miami convenience store there is no record of the two of you living together or separately, although a subsequent and thorough investigation by a legal aid as you once were in your late twenties shows a significant contribution to a Buddhist temple as a form of spiritual retreat lasting a year; and at the age of 31 a marriage to Seargent Dubois

of the New Orleans police Department, formerly a plumber who now incarcerates you here-- "So what should I know, Sister Mary Elizabeth: that I am one of the ugly ones in the audience?" "Well, Sister Connie, that may well be the case, but to me you are adorable, the many obese parts of you. Well, tolerable is a better word. I have lived with you so long I have gotten used to certain things, and even partial to them. The myriad angles of your circular physique are just some of them. No, I am meaning that ugly people come to Guitar concerts and what not to find some inner beauty for themselves when so ugly. But then they have to come back home and look into cracked mirrors." "Sister, you are in the audience too."

## Chapter Seventeen

Without monetary accruements there were no delusions that they could buttress one's putative existence. Without a partner there was no marital nexus that fostered expectations of an improved future (no woman ever linking to a man for a worse life despite for better or for worse promises).

No, she would not enter looking and smelling as a Raggedy Ann pulled out of a rubbish heap; nor could she enter while inwardly as tenuous as a paper doll. An overt rejection, or even a more subtle avowal of disinterest with a derisive smile and she could be lost to herself forever. It was suddenly clear to her the potential lethality of words exploding onto such a person as herself, for in one second they could efface consciousness like a nuclear warhead, and in less than an hour, if an instrument like a rope or a razor blade were to be found as complement, material substance could be obliterated as well. Suddenly she turned and began walking the way she came. And as she did so, she knew that he was her deepest connection and love, and she wept inconsolably.

## Chapter Eighteen

Yes, first it had started as the burning of the heart. Then it had become a burning in the groins. Now before the commencement of erotic dreams which would brand her to him forever, she killed him. But wasn't life always that way?--large amounts of rain water swelling a river always beget larger than usual fish; and from this advantage would come the fishermen, and from them a lesson of life to the two tremulous bystanders, girls linking quivering hands together as they watched a floundering fish bleeding ever the more profusely in fighting for breath and life--dressed in cap, sunglasses, and a baggy shirt she had come to him, the monk, at his personal compound in the monastery (the monk having persuaded her that it was here that he would be able to elucidate more clearly the Buddha's teachings even if he was reproached by breaking conventions which were impediments to good purposes)--oh, what mutations awaited the girls in finding themselves in such a world--how cogent he had been as though he knew a truth that she, such a pure receiver, would be privy to and he could not disclose to anyone else, a truth iridescent as a rainbow in an understanding of it all--along the concrete boardwalk the fish was gutted, and they laughed at the two marred girls and their trembling innocence, that would, from the travail, become hardened scab over wound, no longer with any animistic pathos--"Did you. really think that I would love you the way I did when you were young? Why would love be above and beyond change and death," said her mother. "Like everything else, it is a natural deception to get the human creature to do a natural function. I dont think you need to be breast fed again? Do you think that when I cease putting my nipples into your mouth that I would love you the same without that intimate act? Wake up and look around you!"--And when he in his dung shaded saffron robes showed her herbal medicine that he claimed to have created as an analgesic to geriatric pain, she knew that he, Lothario, had spiked her drink with morphine--she whose boyfriend was still working at the convenience store.

## Chapter Nineteen

And if she felt that her love to him, her pall of him, was destined like the very shape of the planets, a complete love in him whom she did not know that fell onto her in an avalanche of her own making, she was still able to kill him, her concept of him, when buried in the debris. Still it should not have been so difficult. Normal relationships had artificial byproducts that were nothing more than adumbration of the two material beings being together; and shadow of this seeming more real than the two of the material substance who cast it into being seemed absurd enough.

And yet even her chimera of a relationship was real solids of a sort, and there was no ethereal romance in asphyxiating and having to break through the source of the asphyxiation. If nature pushed even siblings when isolated from all others toward the pleasure enticement to breed, why should it not be expected to confuse the logistics of her own movements? Still she was walking away. She was walking away, wasn't she, she asked herself. The heart percolating and becoming an ethereal gas, the world transforming with the materialization of new land, new vistas, from oceanic volcanoes, and brain skidding on tectonic plates, while spewing like shaken beer fulminating out of the can, she had to kill the him who was within her.

## Chapter Twenty

He had been a child's graffiti of crayon marks on the living room wall smudged and blended into one. He had been the accidental running of colors into each other, this mixing and diluting of bright distinction. He had been her blight, but he was dead now. Wasn't blood at this very second there upon her hands?

Two blocks away from that same Jack in the Box, she knew that as she was not able to block the blood of her period from soaking her clothes, her liquidized defecation would soon be a waterfall that she could no longer dam up. Almost with perfect timing, she made it to the bathroom before the diarrhea started flowing, although to one of the booths or cubicles a few seconds belatedly. It had almost been an inconspicuous and socially acceptable release.

"Get out of there," said the black man as he kicked on the door of her hermitage. "Yes, it is me; and I'm claimin' my hole. Get your white-ass out of there. You didn't expect to see me here, did you, bitch? So is that where you're spendin' all of your time everyday: in the lady's restroom of the Jack-in-the-box? Is this your new home? You think you are a lady? You aren't. You're homeless trash, a bitch doing dirty business on the outside. Let me tell you something! When I fuck a bitch, the bitch is mine, and you don't get any different ideas!" The pounding continued.

## Chapter Twenty One

"Oh, Sister Connie, with rare exceptions, American culture is diarrhea of the mind. This CD isn't so bad, I suppose. It isn't exactly the same as the guitar recital we saw last night, but it is the same musician and similar material--at least I gather that from what it says on the back of CD holder. Anyhow we will have the wino sisters imbibe it over dinner in place of other libations. My idea is that with these dinner and light music sessions the nuns will eventually become less feral-- less likely to kill each other. So when is this potential creature going to arrive Sister Connie?"

"Do you mean the potential novice?"

"Yeah her-- the potential potentiality of a novice."

"She's already here. She is upstairs. I just thought that you wanted to preview the music before we do anything else."

"Well, you thought wrong. Anyhow, we previewed it or pre-listened it. Somehow preview does not seem the right word. Anyhow, get her down her. Let's get this show over with."

## Chapter Twenty Two

"This is Sister Kenyon."

"Kenyon? No. We will give her a less less pagan name that she can use while staying here. Is Diane a good enough name for you if we decide to tolerate you for a few weeks of assessment?" Kenyon kissed the cross hanging from the gold chain around her neck. "Lord!" said the old woman, "You think that's a Catholic practice--this drooling on things? Whatever you think you know, there is a difference between kissing a cross on the wall of a chapel and kissing a Catholic amulet dangling around a neck. The one is a display of deference to church authority and objects of reverence. The latter is brown-nosing the head of an organization. I suggest that you learn the difference. Each day you are here you will get up before sunrise, and do everything the sisterly way. And when you, Potential Sister Diane, attend mass with us, I advise you to sit in your pew, and begin observing people as they go in and out. Let me assure you: no one drools on anybody's neck. They just don't do what you just did, missy. Hope the cross doesn't turn to rust. "

## Chapter Twenty Three

"What I want to know is what exactly makes you think that someone like you —someone, anyone, not you specifically— should be allowed to take a greyhound bus from New Orleans to Baltimore, and without being invited, knock on our door in the wee hours, the door of our convent, our home, and say that she is called here by God. How, Sister Connie, do these people get this calling, and why do they come to us? In your case, did He place an inter-universal phone call to you? If Jesus Christ is here on the American continent the way the Mormons say he is, or was, did He use AT&T to tell you to pack up your things, head on a Greyhound bus, and plunk your butt on our door step? That is what we have to determine. A voice of God, you say—very well; but if you give me a shot of whiskey, I am certain I would hear more of God's opinions than God ever opined by himself. And just because person X happens to think that the voice of God is telling her to come here, doesn't make it so. Are we in fact compelled to take in all these stray birds making such claims, dress them in respectable habits and wimples, and call them nuns? If we were to take in every crazy claiming to be sent here by God we would have sisters stacked up to the ceiling and be the laughing stock of the community. That, we would be! You see my point, don't you? And this happens more often than you think. Sometimes it is poor folk like the people we are trying to serve who decide that it would be more comfortable living in a nice house assisting the poor than to live in row houses and be assisted as some of the poor-- by us, hopefully, or God forbid, by drug pushers and pimps. We've had everything here, haven't we Sister Connie? All these claimants from Manic Depressives to Multiple Personalities—all have graced these walls with similar claims. When I was on retreat years ago Sister Connie got it into her head that we need to let in Multiple Personalities to become novices. What was that woman's name? When I learned of it I quickly shipped her off to Nova Scotia or wherever she came from--not Sister Connie, but I was tempted to send them off together. I'll never forget that as long as I live—or forgive it either."

Sister Connie chuckled. "So you always tell me. We did talk it over on the phone. Remember, Sister? And you even interviewed her."

"On the phone! That does not prove a thing. Phone calls are deceptive, Sister. I've said that time and time again. A telephone call can make a monkey sound sensible. Not that a phone call can't be a fine delusion. My favorite time is when I talk to you all on the telephone from the Washington D.C. convent and falsely believe that I have an intelligent team in place."

"Instead of monkeys?"

"Instead of something-- old birds maybe. On the phone and in a resume one can look qualified enough, but it takes a meeting in person to assess someone. God doesn't shoot off an email telling us when someone has the calling and there have not been any substantive manifestations that I know of in which He has discussed these issues; so we have to assess who has the calling the best that we can. I know a lot of young ladies--old ones too--who think that wearing a habit is a sign of divinity."

## Chapter Twenty Four

"But let me tell you that unless you have the calling the habit, especially the wimple, is the same as a transvestite dressed up for a New Orleans Marti Gras weekend. Anyone thinking there is something romantic about this uncomfortable attire, our distinguishing feature, is a few bricks shy--Oh...stop that Fresca!...that dog! Look! Oh, Sister Connie, for the love of God, why don't you remove her when we have meetings down here?"

"Sister, a half hour ago you said that you wanted Fresca here."

"Well, a half hour ago she was sweet and cool like her name implies--How would I know that she'd be this volatile: one moment fresca, one moment caliente? You should have removed the dog pillow or had Sister Marylyn do it. We have had such a terrible time with her. At first we thought when she folded it, it was her way of saying that she wanted to eat a bit of a taco or an enchilada--we pamper her, you know. Little did we envisage it as a sex toy until astute observation proved her pleasuring herself with it."

"I will remove the pillow now, Sister."

"Why now? The profanity has already been witnessed. The dirty deed has been done and seen by the world. We might as well be showing triple X-rated movies down here in the basement and just invite everybody from the Greater Metropolitan Area of Baltimore in for a bit of entertainment and edification on the theme of animal masturbation."

Connie laughed, her buxom figure bouncing her dangling fat like a bowl of jello. "That dog is a bird. The sisters here are birds too--each a mental case, each a psychological study, and they aren't even crazy...or not that I know of. Why do you, Diane, or Kenyon--it is Kenyon, isn't it--why do you want to be a sister and join this loony group? Are you crazy?"

"No, I want to do God's will," said Kenyon. "I also want to spend more time in prayer."

"It's an active order. We barely have time to change our underwear let alone pray. Last night hungry, unemployed transients found out where we lived and began banging on our doors at 2 o'clock in the morning because the food pantry was closed. This is the life, and many of our best have eventually had nervous breakdowns. Can you cook?"

"I can, Sister. I have been doing it all my life for my family--I did it until my mother passed away last week."

"I see. So that is the voice you have been hearing. Your mother's death, loneliness, and needing a purpose in your life are your impetus. It's more real than imagining voices of God calling you to be a nun, don't you think?"

"I don't know."

"Well, for a while you can stay as we figure out what to do with you. You will be renamed as Sister Diane. Sister Connie, take Sister Diana's things-- temporary Sister Diana's things-- up into the attic."

"I will," said Sister Connie.

"No you won't. Get one of our laborers to do that. You are no slinky. With all those pounds on you, you are going to tumble down the steps one of these days like a fat China doll, and then what will we do? Prayers at 6 prompt, temporary sister Diana. If you miss them, which you shouldn't as you seem to like them, you will be put back on a greyhound bus headed for New Orleans. I hope that is clear. Fresca darling, I bet you want an ice cube. Sister Connie, had you gotten her a cube before this meeting took place, I would not be fighting off embarrassment right now. Do you know that? You have to give her ice cube distractions so she doesn't do the pillow thing. How many times have I told you that?"

## Chapter Twenty Five

With one of the hinges on the door of the toilet cubicle broken, he reached in, clasping her by the seem of her shirt; and she daydreamed a less detailed and more cursory version of that which, on a less conscious level, she had daydreamed a few minutes earlier, thinking it merely as a hope.

"Are you coming in or just standing out there?"

It was the convenience store worker and he was smiling at her through the open door, with the right flank of his body leaning against the handle of the mop. It seemed auspicious enough to her, but smiles were only momentary flashes, the blinking headlights of vehicles veering and careening in brevity and mortality with all other dark matter of the spilling universe. As such, what meaning did his smile ultimately have? Even she could sense major themes generally: this wanting the present moment to be more real than all other former moments that were present at an earlier time, friends who were always lost with enough time; when married with children, all earlier relationships that were forgotten in the yearning for some semblance of permanence; and for a second a smile that might be truly benevolent, then courteous and benign, innocuous and meaningless, and finally mock the one so needy of it.

"Do you remember me?"

"I think so. You came in earlier tonight...looking for ice cream, didn't you?-- Not buying any."

"Yes, you do remember me," said Kenyon. She was thrilled but demure and diminutive in a constrained exuberance.

"Did you leave something behind? Did you lose something?"

She had. It was her heart. It was absurd to think of the desire for personal intimacy as an internal organ or to think she had lost it. Only the ineptness of language, that language that fused so many types of love into one word, would use heart to give a visual metaphor and tangibility to this desperate albeit elated feeling. Still it was undeniable that there was gentle but troubled warmth pressing upon her with the levity of a gas and the gravity of mass, and that his presence affected it as moon to tide. It was undeniable that it was a feeling of a pleasant drowning within and a belief that one designated man would act as her lifeguard. But it was also extension; and people would risk their entire lives for an extension as it was an escape from the prison of the self.

For a few seconds the convenience store worker gloated at her expression as though she were feeding him, replenishing the manhood which hours of toil had siphoned off.

"My memory's pretty good. Damned good, really."

"It would have to be. I mean you have a job and everything. I am sure there is a lot to remember."

"When shipments come in, that's a fact. It's a real nightmare for those who's not good in remembering. You live around here?"

She nodded.

"Where?"

"Nowhere in particular." She looked down; and then glancing up into his face again, she sensed that he knew.

"No job either?" This was undeniable proof that he knew. And as there was so much of the exterior of her life already known to him, and all the interior ineffable, she just stared down at those polished shoes of his with the dark tassels--those that had such shine that, earlier, she had seen her reflection therein—and a visual symbol of consummation (her adumbration in his) once again came upon her. Staring into it, feeling at one with him but sensing that it could not last, she knew that if her unemployment and her desire to continue this way did not make her detestable to him and the universe at large, it would be a miracle. Jobs, after all, were roles in the world; and in being so bold as to both inadvertently and deliberately have none, to have no function, there was just the innate worth of an individual that one could place upon herself for meaning, a sentiment in defense of the inalienable worth of man. However, to be tenable, each person would have to be purposefully designed to be an ornament of the world. But a fetus could be aborted or miscarried, a newborn stillborn or fallen prey to miniscule organisms within or gargantuan beasts without—the worst which was wanton man who, much of the time, was oblivious of anything but the animal within, making him the most beastly of all creatures. Innate worth was neither supported by commerce or mortality with money vital for life and old age finishing all.

"I was at a Burger King near the French Quarters for about six months. It was okay for me. It was the only job I ever had. It helped buy some medicine for my mother that the insurance would not pay for, furniture that had to be bought after Katrina; and with foodstamps we survived okay, but she needed me home. She was quite ill. "

"I am sorry. I hope she is better now."

"It's better now...for her. I know that she is at peace."

"I am sorry. But I guess if you think she is at peace it is good then," he said diffidently with the awkwardness of the situation making him retreat. "I need to go back to work now. I have another hour on my shift. I won't force you to leave if you sit out here—only just sit on the bench, and don't go to sleep. Even if I didn't report that somebody else would.

"Thank you for remembering me."

"There isn't much really to remember, is there? You kind of went in and out, didn't you?"

"Yes, I know. But you did not have to remember me at all and yet you did. I want--I know it may seem silly to you-- but I want to say thank you."

"Okay," he laughed awkwardly. "You are welcome then. Well, I am going in since, I guess, you don't need anything."

But as needy as she was, what else could there be for her but a litany of unfulfilled needs of the lowest tier. Long-term, she needed a sense that one so nondescript with neither role nor residence should be cared about a little, and she had come to someone, anyone, especially male, especially him, to plant these seeds of herself into his brain. For whatever wistful caprices pullulated, overwhelmed, dragged, entreated, and bedazzled consciousness, she did not expect friendship from him let alone a relationship. Success would be had in not being reviled by the one whom she hoped would begin to think of her, and by these thoughts at his volition, give substance to the adumbration that was her.

"I'll go away now."

"Okay. You know, you have something in your hair-- leaves or something."

"Oh." She squatted back down with one hand brushing out hair, and the other one prying into her shoes. "Another rock," she said.

She disliked mendacious claims but a rock could have gotten lodged inconspicuously in the tongue of her shoe as words had in her mouth, making the probable mendacity mendaciously void and truthful; and as the visibility of the foulest aspect of a person made him or her unlovable, and it was some nominal love all beings sought (some sense of comfort in the dog-eat-dog hostilities that epitomized the planet), she did not mind lies—only the debasement of life that made one repugnant and ruined all chances of establishing nexus and extension.

"Okay. Bye."

"Can I come back?"

She was surprised by that unique and purer essence of feeling which, incubated in desperation, had surreptitiously leapt from heart to mouth, before mutating like a flying cockroach, and transferring to him the adulteration of banal words that did not seem entirely her intention. Still there they were, and she began to tremble for she had inadvertently elongated the conversation with him while viscous ordure continued to attach itself to her skin and clothing. She feared that he would know that which she hid, and that he would think her vile and hate her for the weakness that made her susceptible to the elements.

"It's a convenience store. It's open twenty-four hours."

"I want to see you."

"Why?"

She did not respond. She did not know how to respond. She needed to be saved, but as so much so imperative inside her had been dead for weeks, she did not know how she could be resuscitated.

"Okay. Tomorrow, same time. Tomorrow will be better--less hours. Coffee, or something to eat, if that's what you want. Tomorrow... Maybe."

"Thank you."

"I've been there, in a car...years ago. But there are showers in the city park. Clean yourself up before I see you again. Okay?"

"Yes," she said as the door closed behind him.

Elated?--no, hardly with defecation sliding down the back of her legs; hardly that with vulnerability of the chambers of one's heart, this maceration and blending of its tissue with another being, imagined or real. She knew little of him (a worker, not a manager, with a lascivious smile who was enervated from a job that wore him raw), and she knew that he knew little of her (cloven hearted tramp without a home, felled as a tree, vertiginous from all the changes of life, swine-sodden and enervated from her environment, but filthier than he imagined); but he had not rejected her, and for that she loved him even more.

Had he shunned her, the repudiation would only have been of shadow-- shadow insolent enough to seek becoming matter but never materializing as such—and, slinking, she would have reverted naturally back into a world of adumbrations. But now she was made human by interaction. She was made material, and as animated as that might entail, the material was fragile as a plaster doll. But animate and ambulatory she was; and cantering forward as she did down malodorous urine evaporated patches of sidewalk and edges of streets, she was oblivious of anything but the wish to be in the Jack-in-the-Box fast-food restaurant so that she could clean herself up substantially before walking further toward the city park and its public restrooms with their shower room amenities.

When she finally arrived at the restroom of the restaurant she, this homeless creature, cleaned herself privately in the booth with toilet bowl water and a sponge that the cleaning lady had abandoned. In this exigency, this humbling of her fumbling being to its sordid base, hubris to be more than an animal, she knew, would be a liability. Hers were less than pristine waters, but she was grateful to be here to efface the streaks on her legs, and to strain her underwear via the toilet bowl. Later after the wringing and the putting on of these wet clothes, giving added impetus to the itching fungi sores upon her skin, she combed out the leaves from her hair with her fingertips and entertained more thoughts of him-- of loving him, although soon they kept striking like an anvil upon her brain. She knew that weakness had made her love him whom she barely knew, he whom she did not want to need--for to do so, to love this stranger, would be to accept the premise that love was her own creation, an inherent neediness for happiness that washed upon her shore from the inherent ocean within. Did she in fact think this very thought? Certainly if she thought less she felt more, in those raw and uncomfortable feelings therein. She desired him and yet desire was not that which she wanted. Others might seek the reminder of being alive in lust and desire, or to thrill themselves in inundations of pleasure in sex, but for her sex was not wonderful for the pleasure it brought unto her but for the equanimity of her state of mind after the experience had ended. Did she really have a date with him? To her it was so wonderful and implausible like a romantic girlhood fable.



Eating hamburger and French fry remnants, cockroach-thief on the residue of food and the spoiler of the establishment, she knew that she was no better than, and was at one with, the insect. She wanted to devour that which was before her but tried to eat slowly, cautiously, for to not do so would be a red light that she was no normal paying customer. And if she were successful in feigning that which she was not she might, for all of this, have a filled stomach—she, this fool, might be full until hunger and the scarcely sufficient means of satiating it gnawed upon her once more. She could end it all. It would certainly go on without her: births, deaths, and this flurry of movement in between with each non-scavenging human using his or her prowess to obtain sizable pieces of the economic pie and new technological devices being invented to get all the crumbs of the crumbly pie into skilled hands all the more expeditiously (gentle and ignorant people be damned as innocence and virtue were superfluous in a world based on competitive strife for limited resources, of Nitzschesque Will to gain and gain happily at the expense of losers). If she were dead, tree branches would continue to move from winds, birds would continue to sing, babies would continue to cry, edifices would continue to be built, traffic would continue to surge in all this temporary interconnectedness replaced with other interconnectedness, and her absence would be absolutely inconsequential. A worker who drowned herself in the bayou would be replaced and might even be mourned by a mere few for a day or two, but a homeless person without a family would be like a bug flattened by the heel of a shoe. There were no epitaphs for them any more than there were epitaphs for any ground beef.

A man and woman came in with their suitcases, perhaps, to eat before checking into a nearby hotel, and she fell into them vicariously, her diminutive being imbibed into their sun. From what little she overheard of their conversation at an adjacent table, and by their northerner accent lacking a drawl, they were out-of-state tourists eager to see the French Quarters. But listening further, there was more than that: they were dismissing their mundane lives and problems at home in a desire to reclaim that personal love, which in having wrought family and monetary issues, was now wrung by the material that had come out of the fruition of their love. Somewhere late into the conversation he reproached her for having called the children on the telephone when the two had been in the car, and reminded her that as their sons were being cared for by the nanny, they should not spoil their holiday by giving them much thought now. Once she, Kenyon, had discovered some photographs of her mother and father on their honeymoon in Thailand, and from that time forward she always wanted to go on a trip to this Southeast Asian country so far away from her insular life in the family home in New Orleans. The photographs of the Golden Mount always appealed to her most: the stone steps inclining and spiraling around the man-made "mountain" in the city of Bangkok, the bells hanging from a parapet around the steps and rung for good luck, the small golden roofed temple at the top, and foremost, the ease by which one could jump off anytime he or she wanted and plunge into the oblivion of greenery below. And from these photographic images vaguely remembered now, she knew that her parents were so happy back then. Little could they have envisaged their daughter over thirty years later wishing to fly there to procure an ending to her solitary life in the same place that they had sought the beginning of their shared existence. At one time suicide had seemed to her so blasphemous, but that was before Katrina which had come over them as the wrath of a demonic god, not the god of compassion and love but the Brute of brutes, the real face, the real god, and soon the loss of livelihood, a mother destroyed insidiously by her own cells, the garish ceiling lights turned on at 6:00 in the shelter, and the mandates of a Christian organization compelling the exodus of these "guests" onto trash strewn streets. But if she were pregnant it would be different, for every stray bitch no matter how emaciated and listless, found rejuvenation in nurturing offspring. It was the instinct and programming that kept species perpetual and brought personal meaning when universal meaning did not exist.

"Where have you been, bitch! Don't you know I've been lookin' for you?"

"What?"

"What?" the homeless blackman mocked. "You've been avoidin' me. Is black not good enough for you any longer--you got some white nigger bangin' you now?"

"No"

"No sir!"

"No, Sir. I stay by myself."

"Stay by yourself? One week you're spread your legs; then the next two you want to stay by yourself," he guffawed. "Sounds like the usual female B-I-T-C-H response. Time to come with me. What honey, you scared of me? I'nt nothin' for you to be scared'bout if you treat me nice. When you ain't nice it's the only time you should be afraid."

She ran back into the restroom, but before she could lock the door of one of the cubicles he had her, and all she could do to empower herself, or at least to thwart his will, was to clasp the electric hand drier on the adjacent wall tightly with both arms. And as she did this she closed her eyes, and began muttering "No" repetitiously. Then the screams came. She knew not from whence they came, but they came all the same, seeming not to come from her but incapable of being conceived as materializing from any other source. No, they were not screams for life by one who wanted death, but screams of the perennial nightmare of existence (hers, and others that would be of the same atoms as that which she now temporarily possessed, who would face turmoil and travail of living lives different than hers, but tumult all the same) even when it was not prompted by his demands for her to let go of the device. And as she continued to loudly resist him, the pocket knife went into her back, while the fear of it all made her unable to catch her breath. She was not even aware of the knife piercing her body. She thought that she was asphyxiating. And there were some seconds when she believed that she was in a car with the convenience store worker, and that it was he who was choking her. She kept thinking to herself that she should not have signed that insurance policy making him into her beneficiary as his cupidity was now her demise. Of course, she had always known that the universe did not reverberate with her seemingly salient yearnings. The hunger for love might exist in all organisms in one respect or another-- each seeking completion in another (microcosm in macrocosm in a personal tier)-- but her yearning in a world where an earthquake could decimate millions had no significance beyond herself. The world did not care whether or not her life was replete in love; and what did she know of love anyhow unless it was her father groping and ravaging the contours of her body. As the copious blood cells spurted out of her profusely she imagined her mother's electric Christmas candles glowing in the window pane, the sound of Christmas music which she had equated with an ethereal love of mankind that never really existed, and that time of sitting on the bus next to a young man with myriad inflammations like warts on his neck and face, both which he tried to hide under a bulky hat as his head tilted toward the floor of the bus, and of her putting his hand into her own.

Sister Mary Elizabeth was putting a Christmas wreath on the door and slapping Sister Connie's fat hand. "Get out of the way, you. I may be 78 years old but if I can't put up a wreath on my own that's the time you choke me and send me off to happier pastures. Is that woman, Kenyon, in one of the upstairs rooms—Sister whatshername, whatever name we devised for her?"

"She seems to be settled in now; but I don't know that she should really. I don't know that it will work out."

"We can get rid of her anytime that we want. Keep her informed of that politely. Who knows? Maybe she will have a use. Stranger things have happened. You've been with me all these years, haven't you?"

## Part II

### Chapter One

Awake; the ceiling fan left on as movement for the sake of movement; dust overlaying the edges of each blade and the whole cognate in a slow fomenting of the same air....Stifling confines with time noted only by daylight-plethora-and-paucity falling onto furniture and walls, onto plants reiterating a motif of sedentary lifelessness, and on body confined to a bed--its mind in animistic wanderings (houseplants, table and chairs all having conversations—small talk-- with me on any given day, and yet critical, not credulous, I may yet have shards of sanity); waking macerating dreams as sleep had of the awakened state; a life unrecognized, placid for a second, groping for itself the next, until recalled indubitably in pain—Pain en media res and perennial, but sometimes, like this, so acute and unbearable. Oh God!

No, not homeless and ambulatory, like that which I dreamt about, if it was a dream, but paralyzed and in house arrest; not fetid and reeking, causing people to turn away in aversion, seen but invisible in that sense, but regularly bathed, for what that is worth -- appearance maintained, more or less, but apparently, only for me. What was all that last night—of being homeless, wandering the streets of New Orleans: nightmare or fantasy? It has been over a month since I have felt the sun directly onto my skin,

smelled winsome scents wafting in the unfettered movement of open space. To walk through a park and see a plastic bag caught up in winds before a tree—for this I would sell off a kidney. Breathing hard and loud as a panting dog—need the morphine; need the toilet if I can get up. Pain: that same theme! So sick of hearing myself. But if I don't talk to me, then I'd just float away, wouldn't I? According to Herodotus cats in Egypt jump into fire; but why would they? Material goes to material when it is comfortable to do so—when there is any chance of it being safely ensconced there. Thus, when Cat jumps onto my lap, it returns me to the sense that I really am substance. If I did not have him I would disperse like smoke. So easy it is, when in seclusion, to vanish. The same, I suppose, with pain. Feel it and it confirms one is indeed alive.

Oh, God! So excruciating... particularly now! But then why wouldn't it? It is in having felt such acute pain that I took the Morphine last night; and it is in sleeping so long and so soundly that I am in such agony now. But I don't dare take it upon waking from bouts like this or I would soon disappear for good. Would that be so bad? I don't know—depends on what death is like. The here and now is certain, whatever pain it presents to us. What made it all so painful last night? I mean, besides the physical pain and the emotional tumult of being locked away here. Oh, yes, Christmas Eve with him no show and finding my mother's letter. He must have brought it a couple weeks ago without saying anything to me, sticking it onto the bookshelf among all the newspapers, magazines and crap—only by chance did I find it at all. I opened it, I did, but didn't read a thing, tossing each and every page up against the ceiling fan to scatter every which way. That will be my great project today: to see if I can clean up this mess I have been rolling on all this time, crumbling and shredding it with the weight of the wheel chair as I make my way down the hall and into the bathroom.

Did I expect Chuckles the clown to suddenly appear--to be my deliverer, to come down the chimney as Santa Clause? Chuckles the clown didn't come down the chimney because there is no chimney to be had; and even if there were a chimney, this niggardly police officer thug slash former plumber would not have been a benevolent and generous entry to say the least-- Chuckles whom Hurricane Katrina and the loss of a police force, New Orleans's finest, allowed the opportunity to undergo this hideous metamorphosis. But, in passing through the flames of temporary forms cognizant of their brevity and each seeking to get what can be gotten from life, we all change into something we never wanted to be, burnt beyond all recognition, and this is the human soul. No, the body alters but its insidious change is slower—vastly quicker in my case with degenerative scoliosis and these fraudulent quack surgeons thinking themselves architects and construction workers, there to prop up the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

As I in my scoliosis lie here in agony with heart as empty as my Christmas stocking, his hands have no doubt been full of stockings of his own...stockings pulled off some barefoot bimbo, broad, or babe. What else would he have been doing last night, Christmas Eve, but his usual philandering? Women who like powerful men do love the gleam of a police badge, but I was never one of them. I was never taken in by such things; but then he was a plumber when I first knew him, and plumber he will stay in my mind. Back then he snaked out liquids with his tools; now, he arrests criminals, and in his free time he comes for their wives, to induce them to show their drains, emitting Liquid Plumber of his own into them. Well, they can have him. Yes, they can. *[Looks out the window]* Oh, the sky has such dark clouds. They look like overarching hills--so tactile. If I could make my way out of this, if I could float out of the window, if I could crawl on this less than azure horizon until I find new dales within the crevices of dark and golden celestial mounts. To open the door and run away from here, crawl in my case, I'd have to get through the pit bull and the Rottweiler, and that is impossible. I've tried to drug them before. That doesn't work. They just stand there ready to take off my hand-- never eating bits of food I throw out to them. Only his hand do they trust. The window is my only extension. If the nearest neighbor were not so far off I might yell out until someone came for me. But even then one would have to be mobile enough to get out somehow and the windows are too high to stick one's head out even if she were to manage to break the glass. To flee--but it is impossible to flee from one's genetic sanctions, and the circumstances of one's life: me, the wife, so ugly in her twisting spine that she is hidden away like the Phantom of the Opera. Let him philander. There was a time when I used to believe that measuring a man's emotional attachment and faithfulness on monogamous actions was like reproaching a dog, a complete sentient being, for only barking what he should be able to articulate. But even then I could never figure out new criteria.

I feel sick. I feel like I could vomit—from the medication, and the fact that Chuck has not come over here for so long—not even coming on Christmas Eve. So, I am not the most beautiful creature any longer. I wouldn't argue that I was or that I ever was. And as aggression and rapine, hunger for beauty and base pleasure, empowers the conception of children in this strange world, not love (love, dispassionate understanding, clearly militating against the formation of family) a man that finds a woman repulsive cannot be thought of as married to her. Still, all this unnerving silence, this discarding of someone one has known for so long—where is there any humanity in all of this? Still, it is what it is; and the mélange of one's life has to be crafted from whatever scattered rubbish exists. I talk to myself; I add a few lines to my new vampire horror which I then change on the

following day and the next; I knock down spider webs from a broom; I feed the cat and empty the litter box into a plastic bag; I even sweep the floor and empty the dust bin into the toilet—with what lucid moments I possess, what few hours I have that are not overtaken in sleep.

I?... One day I will wake up and forget that there is this I, this indispensable illusion of I, in this damaged encasement, this easily divested bonding of elements called an organism with its yearly tower of Pisa bending of the solid stone, solid backbone, and not just the foundation--a figurative warping that might be ubiquitous for everyone else but a literal warping that is mine alone, just mine, my spine, just me...or people like me with this genetic disposition--a sundry of scattered and isolated pathetic souls ensconced obscurely in their respective confines on the planet, each in this same shape that I'm in-- me: scoliosis specimen exhibit 100,000,000-z-nothing. To take or not to take morphine--that is the insoluble question, the repeated question-- whether the pain is bearable and the amount can be kept well under the prescribed daily dosage, or if it is to be taken fully and I go from a ranting lunatic to one swallowed in the swollen inundations of sleep--I who have just awoken from a wretched dream of some sort or another and do not particularly want to go that way any time so soon.

Whether rational conscious activity is empowered by the subconscious, I have no desire to be in morphine induced sleep throughout my days in life. Still, to take or not to take...even in conclusions that I will not, that I cannot, that I shall not, there are still parts of the brain debating the topic. To be or not to be, and until a unanimous answer comes I ramble on, brambled in thought, unstaunched wench, changing the words of my repeated themes ever so slightly so as to be a somewhat attentive audience to myself...or at least not to put myself to sleep.

I? And if this illusion of I is merely a cell in the organism of God, despite pretensions otherwise, wouldn't I, especially the way I am, be considered His cancer? Him...as I teeter on the edge I become more credulous of Him...a weakness it is...a weakness to envisage Him who if he exists (one within comprehension, of course, a fable) is beyond our comprehension.

Pain is constancy in a sense, the only constancy ferreting one out of the sinkhole of oneself. Maybe one should be grateful to have it. But there are no strongmen in inordinate pain and solitude, in the thickets and brambles passed through to lose this misconception of "I" at death, or in this insidious smelting of bodily form. Unbearable pain, like being doused in propane and ignited, but softer than that I am sure, is ameliorated with only a few tiny drops.

## Chapter Two

We are all shaken down so as to lose every last leaf (the slightest illness the undoing of the elderly). God, abstraction and delusion of the mind, by necessity bigger than the universe itself, believed, for the sake of perennial hope, to be in an active relationship with each man--creator of the universe befriending such creatures so diminutive that the word microscopic would never do them justice. It is maintained that this being of the mammoth hand, by his friendship of utility, saves all who call out to him when falling off life's precipice, this same god that, at the blink of an eye, will annihilate whole populations in natural disasters, allows children to fall prey to predators, and subjects every man to a brief century or less lifespan. Such is his plan, or so it is alleged as His plan, rationale kept at the distance He keeps us were He to exist, which he doesn't. Dejected creature of hope that I am, how long can I maintain an atheistic stance? I am half calling to Him now. Christians would claim Him humbling me to bring me to the light, if I had a Christian as a friend, if I had any friend. Chuckles pulled the plug on the telephone long ago, then the Internet, and the computer itself after that. If I misbehave, the television, he says, has a problem and needs to go to the repairman. He never takes that one away permanently. He doesn't want a mad hatter on his hands. Why would he? [*She chuckles*] It always returns a few weeks after he confiscates it. In this state of isolation it would be a godsend even to have a Christian friend plastering my mind with all her platitudes, her silly putty impressions of that damned book.

Cancer! Well, I don't have that--or not that I know of. One infirmity at a time to have a slow and dramatic descent downward (Nature loving her drama and seeking to keep its entities on an insidious but hopeful declination. Two and the jailer would in peril (a dead guard, and then the fleeing from the jail of the two culprits and a ruination of the jail if none is jailed). More than nauseous, I am mentally sick, that is for sure --the angst of being trapped here, not knowing when he is coming, and the personal and irrational becoming more concentrated in such a cage without movement--no movement, not even a walk on prison ground in the broiling sun, among barbed wire and colossal walls; and so, with no open air, no objective discernment in the prodigious mounting of minutes. Here, everything becomes onerous, personal, and trenchant. Throw a morsel in the grating of the cell and she in her deprivation will wag her tail, won't she, and look at you, Chuckles, with such loyal tenderness; show, ogre-Charles,

your stern countenance for some seconds, and she in her privations will simultaneously fear you, fear the loss of you, succumb to you, and love you for suddenly materializing after her weeks without human contact--interaction with others, this exchange, this presence coming to talk to me and I talking to him, the only thing that can make us real--that is, if he comes. If not, food will run out--it will just run out-- and I and Catwo will starve to death, that's what we will do, which would make the whole fucking thing not matter. Throw the dysfunctional and those without commercial importance into a pit of a mass grave for the dead. It is important, functional beings contributing to the ease of life for the masses that have value. But then, importance is just a perspective and a minute can make the living who think they are on top of the world and indispensable to others, grandeur itself, into a heap of rotting rubbish.

Maybe, right now I will lean up on the pillows and do my dirty business in a bedpan. Have to do it sometime or another, some way or another and a ride in the wheelchair to the bathroom seems a bit much now. One can count my movements on two hands: to the toilet, to the bathtub, to the closet I use as a pantry, to the microwave, to my desk to do my writing of Vampire in the Mist, my new project, to water the plants, to empty Cattwo's litter box, and the like. *[She relieves herself, removes the pan, and falls asleep. She wakes up an hour later]*. Where's cat? I need cat. Isn't that pathetic? It's pathetic that I need so much, and so heavily now, need Charles. I am dependent on him, my jailer, for my whole fucking life *[Sobs]* I want to go home... go home....home.... And yet I never had a home, or know what one would be like. Daughter of a slap happy indigenous wench with a whiskey bottle in one hand and a whip in the other... stepfather, another Cherokee but ravaging like a New World discoverer as men do *[Cries hysterically while awkwardly massaging her curled, sinuous back, thinking]*. Then, married to my second, determined that this one would last more than a month, I followed my female instinct to build my nest, enlarging it, padding it with the downy of our modest amenities, But the eggs did not fall...they did not fall...but the spinal cord did, came down as faulty scaffolding.

### Chapter Three

Being on the streets...well, being healthy and on the streets...would be better than this, but even this is better than what I had long ago under parental auspices. So says Chiefess Mommy: "You'd forget your own ass if it wasn't tied onto you;" "No, little Miss, no outing for you as putting a tail on the donkey today will be putting your hand on things you shouldn't tomorrow, and who knows what boys will be at that birthday party;" "What the hell is this light on for, or are you the one now making the rules and paying the bills—just think of it, a useless thing like you making money to pay bills around here;" "Get out of that cage, now, and if you don't, I am coming in after you;" "I'll mop the floor up with you—that's what I will do;" "This is my house and if you don't like it you can leave." And so says Chief Daddy: "Don't tell your mother about any of this as she is not too bright, and she has no way of understanding a daughter/father relationship the way we do, for how could she," and so says Chief Daddy: "There will be no whores living under this roof." Fucking drunks! What did I dream of back then? Still seeking to identify myself as part of the Dubois clan, the sacrosanct family name—or so it is to a child, and hoping for connections that, every now and then, almost materialized: once the three of us camping, with me catching lightning bugs for pinky rings, none of that, says mother winsomely, they are God's little creatures, father says, it won't be completely dark for another half hour so who wants to go with me mushroom hunting, daughter, of course, goes out with him in the woods, he expatiating the differences of mushrooms, the differences of trees, then suddenly looking directly at her in guilt and shame. I, after some wasted years, succeeded, went higher, with more education and a professional job as a legal aid, and it all lasted, for a while *[laughs painfully]*. But then what right do I have to taunt family as boozers? My pain killers and morphine dwarf the worst substance abuse. Also, cloistered here, I seem to be losing language, it dying, perhaps a few words a day, along with my brain cells. The other day I must have spent an hour thinking out a different way to say *lounging away* the hours. It, the satiated vampire, turns away from the surfeit-dross of human remains with a rueful and awkward laugh discomfited at its own omnipotence, and then absconds in another back alley of the city whiling away, not lounging away, the hours, cloaked inanimately in the darkest recesses. Of course the abused are crazy. Abandon silence about the past, past in which incidents have no material substance, and another party can claim the perpetrator of the disclosure mad. Why wouldn't she be mad in speaking about that which no one wants to hear? Happenings, after all, are unrecorded stimuli, meteorites in a sense, slamming into and indenting the brain just once, so where's

the proof of them having happened beyond the inner walls of the brain? And also, as there is no memory in the strict sense of the word—each person seeking to make what he or she knows equivocally as palpable as she can by reenacting what is believed to have happened, each reenactment making it further from the original happening, not fully accurate but, sometimes, at least close fictional replicas, which of us isn't literally mad? [Guffaws]. Victim doubly victimized by being impugned, I ran away; and running away which in and of itself, militated against any form of success.

Runaway making a telephone call to her mother from a convenience store avowing those happenings not for censure but rapprochement and reconciliation, or at least, closure, and she is deemed crazy, a liar, an ingrate, a vagabond, and a derelict all rolled into one [laughs bitterly]. But that Adonis, the worker at a convenience store who gave me change for a dollar so that I could use the pay phone to call my family --hardly family, but individuals who must still be attributed or imputed as the genesis of me--was the most attractive Hanguk man, any type of man, I had ever seen; and from the point of finding my reflection there in the Korean leather of his shoes I knew that he would have pleasurable significance in my life—maybe nothing more than that, but hell that is enough when complicated, onerous relationships always founder. It is a field of wildflowers after a shower. It has no use, no longevity of purpose; it is just beautiful, absolutely beautiful, for a time.

So, on that first day after he finished his shift, and thereafter as regularly as possible, always after his shifts, we cramped up in his old Toyota, shedding off artificial clothing in that restricted space. A week into our encounters, I had a job as a waitress and, a few months into things he asked me to live with him. I didn't respond to it so well. I didn't respond at all, really—kept away for a week or two. It seemed like a threat against the gear shift, with material concerns potentially dragging down that which was blissful and ethereal, and of course it did. But when one is in love she takes a chance for that good feeling seems so real, luring one to be connected at every end, and experience love fully. For those who are determined, steering wheel and gearshift pose no serious impediments to uninhibited hedonism—only the cloying, dulling, of the repetition of physical extension and the sense that it had to change, that we had to find a more meaningful connection.

For a man, at any rate, it is the frequency of sex that he yearns for; and it is that that is a relationship's ruination, no matter how exotic the venue; for when wildflowers need to have a more practical purpose than blooming and dying unobserved in the open air they cease in having significance. For him, intimacies, no matter how extraordinary, become impediments to new experiences when repeated often enough. In short, he was bored with me. Still, the closure was not so bad, free as it was of sentiment and sadness, decent in its indecency-- a proposal for broader, if not larger, unions in his bedroom, and these demeaning kiss and play sessions with his female friends. And for him I did it with them, of course. It enabled the relationship to last for some years, or so it seems now. The relationship, I assume would have been briefer yet had I not allowed him to have these other unions. And likewise, to keep what I had for as long as I could I decided that I wouldn't tell him I was infertile-- men's fun in having sex with women no doubt comes subliminally from the fear of losing in the high stake roulette—pregnancy a gain in the reinforcement of virility but a loss of freedom. The brevity of ovulation makes it a game of chance.

## Chapter Four

How odd the world is: each individual life, in scripture of one form or another, supposed to be so precious, and yet potential conception predicated on a game of procreative levity and frivolity of forced insertion and capitulation that should be degrading to both, from the strings of human nature pulled to coerce the taking on of these roles of eraste and eromenos, and yet isn't—most who would spend the greater portion of everyday commingled, naked and gyrating if they could. Well, as Aristotle defending slavery to have his democracy and polis on those backs, and Plato assailing democracy to sustain aristocratic leisure so that he might have his bouts of reverie and discernment, his higher, more intense, more precious intellectual pleasure, when, as he deems it, the corporeal is so tepid, perhaps I am just trying to give a rational defense of celibacy when so repugnant that nobody would touch me [She guffaws]. Yet, I certainly had my rounds of it once upon a time. Yes, I did. Still, throughout, it is roulette, and no man, especially, would have a child without the incentive of physical pleasure and the precarious thrill impetus of chance conception? At least, none that I know of, not that marriage would last long without children.

Need to go to the bathroom, but no more bed pans. I'll have to wheel out sooner or later---sooner really. The place is reeking enough as is—cat crap and my own. Men like what reeks sweetly (and I might add humanly), but only if it is a slight fragrance of

defecaurination wafting around in the air. But I can wait on it for a while. I do have a muscle down there that works well enough—the rest, in this inertia and depredation, turning to fat. I only do anything when directly under the gun, directly under compulsion. What?—I forgot what I was talking about?—talk my *raison d'être*. Insignificance, maybe. However, we could be ants unwittingly in a box of cereal, unwittingly consumed, the consumer unwittingly an active part of society, society part of a world, the world of a universe, and the universe just one minute, unwitting cell within the organism called God. If so, in this faith I am propounding, I am no atheist, but, as its inventor or discoverer, a real potential believer—I certainly believe that I inadvertently ate ants in my cereal last night. [Laughs]. How difficult it is to have resolute convictions of life being so precious, of abortions so heinous, when nature has designed continuity of the race on rides and games of chance. Even murder is to be justified, if not condoned, as the natural course when even the body's immune system attempts to kill all foreign trespassers.

What did I dream last night—of a homeless woman walking around the city in her obloquy, trying to get to a convenience store, to a man who might acknowledge her, one, in her splendid mettle, she is determined to meet even though it could disabuse her of her belief that he is an amicable presence in her life actively caring for her, an implausible and even preposterous idea that she needs to believe in desperately—but there was something else, maybe earlier. Oh, I know. I think I know. Wasn't it?—it was like a fortune teller, cards, and each one that she put on the table was a photograph: photographs of a woman lured in by masculine beauty, and its pheromone; a picture of them dating; a marriage photograph—wasn't there a rat in its cheesed trap in the corner of a room in the church; photographs of them and their children barefoot and the feet elongated by being so close to the camera; of them in the new tree house he had built; of their altercation in front of the bonfire; of her bloody body in the back of a trunk of the car as they come back from the family's camping trip; of him at a custody hearing—the body of his wife might still be missing, but he is still a person of interest, and his interactions peculiar; of a social worker banging on the door when it is slammed in her face; of her banging harder when there is a smell of gas; of the house blowing up before her, blowing her up as well—all of this family, all of this depredation, from an attraction, a sense of love, a sense of eudemonia.

Last week, according to the news, lightning struck a six story statue of Jesus Christ at some church or another in Ohio. An act of God? Well, only if Zeus is God and He does not like the worshiping of false gods. No, nature is the only god—man alters the god with his cities and farmlands; human nature over time can become less emotive, but that is as far as it goes for man is selfish and rapacious by nature. Ultimately god will smite restive man from the planet, and it will return to what it once was once again—beauty and savagery undiminished, undiluted in glossy and refined institutions, hardly better.

Somewhere in his compunction of what our relationship was mutating into, the powers he had devolved unto it, the personal becoming so impersonal, two parties once in love now in these ménage a trios, Donald the convenience store worker proposed to me; but the torrid affair, which I at one time thought would continue perennially as though furthered by more than that which was circumscribed by the laws of corporeal satiety, became two people afraid to contact each other. Neither of us had really believed in the proposal as much as we wanted to, or I wanted to. Maybe it did not exude sincerity, maybe it was not solemn enough, or it was contrived too solemnly like one forced to surrender. I don't know. Anyhow, like everything, it disappeared, replaced soon by a Chuckles the clown, many of them actually, with Charles Chuckles the last. The loss of him meant easy acceptance of proposals thereafter when they came--the four that there were--and always finding out each time that love in marriage, no different than a job, is limiting one's movements like a dog to its bowl, all out of fears of loneliness, of change, of dying meaninglessly, or perhaps of not ever extending into something greater, a caterpillar never turning into a butterfly-- thoughts of the spouse clogging one's brain as they do. How peculiar it is to be human--so eager for extension, eager to be in the company of another, all this energy expended to understand him a little; meanwhile, the self becomes neglected, a desuetude, wealth of mineral recourses interred and untapped like minerals in Afghanistan, or so the news says...so it said when I had a television set last week. That was one of my hopes of Saint Chuckles getting off his horny reindeer and coming down the chimney—the return of my television set.

Losing my voice....It is becoming hoarse and raspy [*She props up the pillows, opens the refrigerator near the bed, pulls out a liter of bottled water, and stares up at the rotating arms of the ceiling fan before falling asleep once again* ]

[Awakens] God, how did I do that? After so much sleep one would think I would stay awake for days, but maybe there is so much of this stuff in my system that just some effusive outburst is enough of a jolt to send it from whatever tissue it permeated into, and back into the bloodstream. Sometimes I wake up and it is not me but something outside me, and I am looking out onto it—not a cartoon character exactly but some adventitious translucency half an abstraction as though the being looked upon had been conceived from a maternal cloud and a paternal abstraction of words—difficult to explain; and at other times, equally ineffable, it is as though I cannot seem to grasp facts (for example if the poinsettia given to me each Christmas for so long had been from husband 1, 2, 3, or 4), with facts associated to the wrong people, and yet with this prevailing sense that although it should matter to me, or to some erstwhile me, it would not matter to the universe overall. Then this disarray of facts seems ingested in some nihilistic mood that I sense to be more in accordance with the reality of things even if form of transient matter belies a different impression entirely.

Madness to talk to myself, I know! But it is offset by the madness that would come if I were not to do so. [Weakly] Cattwo. Where are you, Cattwo? Where's the morphine? I don't see it anywhere--the night stand, the bookcase, where? I won't take it now, God forbid, but it has to be visible. It has to be here if I need it. But then I hide it from myself, don't I? Yes, I hide it for apposite reasons. A long sleep—even a short one like this sometimes-- and I rarely remember where anything is. Once I pushed Cataone's litter box way in a corner behind some boxes clear of my olfactory nerves, and wasn't able to find it for three days. It did its business in the flower pots. When the litter box was found, I threw out the litter and the pots, but no, not the cat. Never the Cat. Well, more like I put it all in plastic bags to be Chucked out, so to speak. Oh, there it is behind the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, obscure to the factions of the divided self most thematically; but now, cat. Where are you at, cat?

## Chapter Six

Dead or asleep in a corner, I suppose, but it doesn't matter. Confined as it's been all this time here with this creature, me, sleep gives Cattwo some moments of a brief reprieve (less facial twitching), and death would be its full pardon. So used to me, it could hardly be cowering from fear. Maybe it has withdrawn in some type of sentient volition, less than a judgment call, where it has decided not to come to me--hardly an offense, since I don't come to it either. Scraps of this and that thrown in its bowl at one time or another of each day. That's about the extent of it. And, maybe like it, whether or not I am asleep or dead is irrelevant. When animal, any animal, human or otherwise, passes out of the realms of society and movement, self slips away. Lacking society, lacking movement (society a type of movement or extension of thought and feeling), a human tries all the more to concoct a sense of reality in the abstraction of rational thought, refined sensation, instead of the fleeting material substance of matter-- atoms that don't adhere as one mass indefinitely. But it doesn't work. If one has physical and mental mobility and thought she can feel immortal and invincible for a while; but exiled and cloistered from others, and all three seem to divorce themselves from each other-- each working singularly as the stuff that that makes us, but not in unity, and when not in unity, not making us feel that we are real. We aren't real and it is only in solitary confinement that we know this to be true; only when the self begins slipping away with body suffused by warmth as comforting as an electric blanket, the warmth of madness.

Nondescript invalid, nonentity that I am, and yet I am guarded like rare minted coins, precious anomalies, in a vault. Erroneous freak and ingrate, but one so honored with two attack dogs at the door, I can't even throw out the trash. I mean literally, throwing it from the door. I can't even do that with them there. I've tried it before. They'll come close to taking off a hand. When the stuttering, obsequious interlocutor timidly questioned him on it, Chuckles the clown said that it was for her good. The beasts were for her safety. And that was that. Taunting them as I have done in recent months, it is amazing that they don't break out of the chains and come charging through the glass of the windows. It would be a reprieve if they were to do that, but a rather rough way of going. Prisoners have reprieves, soldiers' furloughs, but I have nothing now but the same stagnant air, circulating the smell of the fetid bedpan. Can't stand that odor any longer....Besides, I need to go to the toilet again. That will be the main event of the day for me, for there I will see the Virgin Mary materialize in the ordure of my toilet paper, and will watch the Holy mother of the demigod Jesus flushed down to be torn and tangled with other crushed anathema into microscopic matter, traveling through pipes, treatment plants, a river, an ocean, blended with all other defecation of contemporary and deceased beings. [She checks the break on the wheelchair at the side of the bed. Then she lowers herself gently into her transport. She rides, first accidentally, and then deliberately in backward thrusts over her mother's letter strewn on the floor. She begins vacillating forward and backward as if meant to pulverize the papers and the sentiment therein. She rides into the bathroom, light and shadow along floor and wall seeming to her like mixed layers of chocolate and vanilla ice cream--her throne coned in a vanilla layer of light. There, she dumps out the content of the bed pan and relieves herself royally in the garish space]



## Chapter Seven

Denuded; clothes washed diminutively in a plastic bucket with a bar of soap, a mop handle raising them to drip from the rod of the shower curtain, one of a series of dripping sounds, but this one every few seconds and reverberating off an empty shampoo bottle --with clocks confiscated (egg timer I don't know where) this tracks the seconds even though it fails to pin them to minute, hour, date, and year, allowing these contrived abstractions to languish in time and space; the warm water of the bath pouring in from the tap; railing and hands gripped to foist me up and over--patience at this gradual rising and lowering over the tub-parapet, knowing a faltering hand, a weak elbow and I would be lying immobile for days, languishing there to an excruciating lethality; the waters, warm with a lax wet embrace, but at least it is where the reaction is predictable--the need for firm human embraces making one wont to experience affection that can be withdrawn at any whim--my warped body in the water, in this artificial embrace that cannot hurt me, my spine so grotesque, so altered; it is as though I were turning into a canon ball. It is a wonder I don't sink, especially when combined with such ponderous and dense emotions, stones pitted into the stomach in a queasiness suggestive that family is gone, the idea of happiness in family obliterated, concept of family that could disperse and vanish like smoke even with the need of declaring someone as family so strong, especially when effacing all traces of previous family. But happiness pinned on changeable human forms seeking to get what they can in the face of their own mortality or material objects which are without any loving quality at all seems erroneous. Ideas are the best answer, and building oneself up the best one can --maybe; maybe not. And as long as he continues to bring in the bacon, fettered here as I am, ensconced here as I am, I am not in the hostile world—a motorist who gets his bumper hit, takes photographs, and demands the other driver's registration, merchants competing for a bigger piece of the pie or merely to survive. Prejudice, like that toward ugly curvature spined beings, is a defense—all things having their defense. Prejudice is sometimes decried—an ugly word; and yet we all back away from those whose ideas do not adhere perfectly with our own (two ladies drinking coffee, and one looks at her watch and says she has to go). It is all a defense.

Was that who Chuck was to me: a sustained relationship that gave me the power to repudiate the earlier notion of family, to whitewash memory, to go forward with all other matter ejecting into space? Yes; but surely it wasn't limited to that alone. I'm not that egocentric. But judgments of being beatific or selfish notwithstanding, I have to admit that marrying him helped me. It did. I know it did. Maybe I have been unfair. Maybe I treat him unjustly—in my mind if not in person. Too scared to do it in person [*She rests in the heated water for an hour—not without pain but without the extremity of pain, which in turn she finds restful; and then she begins to wash herself*]. Wasn't he so beautiful years ago before we married? I remember the sheen of the burly frame naked and supine on the bed. And we were intimate then...for a time—I mean more than physically: mind and emotions with physical extension. Or at least I thought so then. [*She smiles thoughtfully, mind's eye on the vague memory of sensation rejuvenated in the truth and error of the fiction of imagination, and then her smile vanishes, and the countenance flattens*]. Or perhaps not. No, it never comes together perfectly. The physical is just carnal lust--what does one care about the partner's thoughts and feelings at that time; and after the man ejaculates he goes to sleep, leaving his partner to ruminate on the falsity of physical intimacy as she stands in the vacuity of the mind, large as a desert, with no sense of where to go, all idea of what to do desiccated and lifeless as grains of sand. Perhaps the only times he thought of me strongly were in his emotional reactions of jealousy. I was beautiful for a time, and he wanted to merge into me, into another form, to become more beautiful. But who extends to monsters of scoliosis?

## Chapter Eight

No one could make the claim about Chuck Muck Ruck being entirely indifferent to the misshapen state of his wife or the deteriorating ogre that she has become—at least not in the initial stage. Some men, on learning from doctors about this insidious state, would have been entirely apathetic to their wives, but not Chuckles the clown. No, on the contrary, for a time soon afterwards he was even more intensely intimate with her. Did he not ride his invalid wife for a few years or so after the first botched surgery with more puissant passion, more effusive care than before? Did he not gain great pleasure in inflicting these torturous sessions for a time, probably thinking them just punishment for her having mutated geometrically and grown old and haggard looking before his eyes—from his perspective it no doubt was just punishment as who would care to be married to one in a Kafkaesque metamorphosis, to seek amorous encounters with the ugly (especially an amorphous blob with a rigid backbone smelting over time); and who would wittingly choose the same type of marriage to one who in the merger would spawn an inclement rather than a propitious future? Sexual copulation, by nature, is an arousal for beauty to beget nice and fit, beautiful

children; so it would be rather perverse to consummate it with that which is hideous; but consummate it he did sadistically, showing his masculinity with a dominance that was not tempered or blunted. The same sort of pleasure at kicking one's dog, with curiosity at its reaction—I don't know; but the pleasure and affection were vanquished over time, time changing all.

But that makes him the uglier of the two, doesn't it? The abuser of the emaciated stray dog is always the viler creature. Right cat? [*The cat is playing with its brush on the floor of the bathroom*] He doesn't see it but, physically even his structure is slowly faltering as well—the burly essence turning to flab, the luster he used to possess, maybe still possesses, at times flattened to a lackluster. He has a drier complexion now with bags under his eyes. But long ago he was beautiful, and had Michelangelo been resurrected to see such a form he would have tossed the statue of David into the ocean and began sculpting Chuck [*Listens to the dripping*].

He removed computer and telephone long ago, clocks for whatever reason (maybe just to find out if I would comment on them missing, which I didn't), and then, ever so often, it is the television for a period of time. If he removes the mirrors to keep me from being able to see changes in my own face, only dripping like this will measure time. Where are you going Cattwo? Just come in for a peek? Yeah, I identify. Playing with the brush is meaningless to you after you do it enough times. Still, we try to find something worth living for in our incarceration, don't we? Not that our incarceration is bad. Maybe we, or at least me, are the missing atavistic link—the legless amphibians that have burrowed their way into the shore [*Unplugs the tub*].

## Chapter Nine

So really, there is no intimacy. Of course not. Doesn't Machiavelli remind us that ideals are the brain's ability to perceive the imperfection of what is and envisage a correction which cannot be had; that only a fool has ideals, and what is more idyllic than the illusion of intimacy in a civilization that sprang from the savagery of rape and pillage. [*She turns on the fan to dry the wet clothes; pulls out some dry clothes from a drawer with the mildewy smell that she is now used to*] There was a time of childhood, when everything was believable; where Mickey Mouse could be thought of as a god if a parent wished to impose him as such, and there is no bigger mickey than Jesus Christ, no larger imposition—it was the nonentity of He who shackled the minds of Native American animists; and where love is inculcated as truth when it is merely one more appetite. How difficult it is as a teenager to discard all the beautiful, idyllic nonsense, to cease to be naked and free, and from this point forward burdened in onerous hoplite armor, and take on the daggers of trenchant, critical intelligence and cynicism. And yet, runaway, there was no other choice for me, no choice for anybody!

Dressing myself, not that there is much to be dressed for-- habit and custom precluding all other considerations. If I could dance, I would dance naked; but the brain can dance—with a bit of breeze and sunlight, what little permeates these rooms, it can create harmony, bliss, and the nomenclature of hope.

[*She rolls back to the bedroom, and along the way, spots the cat sleeping in a linen basket in a dark crevice between wardrobe and wall*]. Cattwo, you're far from living up to the loyal service of your deceased predecessor; and I think you are afraid of me a bit. You needn't be, but of course you are. I don't hold it against you. You don't know me well. You don't know that I am as fragile and innocent as you. Aggression of the will, the will for power as Nietzsche said, this is happiness. Genghis Khan said that it was razing a village, setting it ablaze after killing the men and raping the women. I don't know such things—these yearnings for power. I am in the ruins of my body as you have witnessed in your sly spying of me in the bathroom and the few weeks or so of you slowly warming up to me, making a toy of Catone's brush, coming to your dish when I go back to my bed. Of course you were just tossed in here as a replacement to keep this old woman sane—anyhow old in appearance. Prison cell it is; sanctuary it could be to Quasimodo types; a walled in Spartan temple to cause our starvation it may turn out at the end. But let's not worry of such things. Let's try to be friends, of comfort to each other in our confinement. The Earth itself is confinement if one chooses to think of it as such. After the death of Catone, Chuckles left me here with no one for two weeks. I began losing all mental balance. Stations of my brain scrambled in static, lines separating sleep and waking becoming all the more blurred, all the more indistinct. Just as I was thinking over and over again that I would leave—each time becoming more and more determined, more and more desperate, quite willing to be mauled to death by those two canine fiends at the door, he dropped you in. This is what the parched earth feels like when it is touched by the beginnings of a rain shower—when it finally opens up and, imbibes the end of its drought. And strangely, I felt deep love for him for a period of days for bringing you to me--

not bitterness at the fact that he had done this to me, left me with no one (no animal I mean) for two weeks, three weeks, something—I don't know.. There is bitterness the way one would have in retrospect at the end of one's troubles, an objective analysis at the end of isolation when one sees such treatment as sadistic and wrong. But I was not there then. I'm not there now [*She guffaws*]. I wanted to kiss his feet. I was so grateful. [*She takes out a ham and cheese croissant from the refrigerator and heats it up in the microwave*]

## Chapter Ten

[*Looking opaquely through a filthy window in the hallway, she is unable to see much of anything except the dense overgrowth of weeds and brush brambled from outside against the window, and so she imagines a different window altogether—one in her tiny office at Ralph & Randolph where she had worked as their paralegal while finishing her last year at law school. She remembers the view upon looking down at lower skyscrapers and then, much lower, a fountain in the center of a lake in a park. And she recalls one time in which she looked down at the swingers, the joggers, a player throwing a racket when he had lost a tennis ball, fully cognizant of that which everyone knew and rarely considered: that it had all come about from sexual appetite, and that society, dominance in the animal kingdom, was sustained from the appetites for comfort, ambition, and delusions of a flourishing, perennial existence. She thought of him whom she had met initially when he was Chuck the plumber fixing a clogged drain at the office. This meeting, and their specious time together for so long thereafter, had seemed so propitious*]. But here I am with this window, these constraints. At times I become forgetful that I am this police officer's experiment on perfect and unobstructed punishment of a culprit not adulterated by lawyers, judges, juries, rights, and appeals. He must see it that way; but then how do I know how he sees it? I don't know how to see it myself most of the time. Sometimes I think he is right, but that he should lock me up in a dungeon instead and throw away the key—that keeping me here is too good for me. He may have pushed me toward the knives that paralyzed me, but he wanted me to walk, and he did not administer the surgeries. He may have dismissed me as much as conscience allows, but he has to live life; and living it, and being burdened by it, are things altogether different from each other. He may have locked me up here, but how would I be much better anywhere else? I don't do anything, I don't contribute to anyone. I don't know. I am not living on the streets. I have this cozy place to myself, so thinking that he is a cruel son of a bitch who ought to be strung up by his balls seems a bit harsh. And how do you hate someone you need, someone who brings you your food, who converses with you upon occasion, actually interacts with you, especially when hate is so negative, so visceral, so unhappy? Here juries are not sequestered but prisoners, and instead of laws we have his moody caprices; but to a tyrant and a believer in himself as purveyor of justice in a system clogged by too many cases, too many appeals, too many paroles, too many violators eluding justice on technicalities, he is the quintessence of justice. He is rectifying, the best that he can, the injustice of being married to such a degenerative hag.

## Chapter Eleven

[*She essays various ideas on the next chapter of her book, Vampire In the Mist, but the pain reels her back toward her bed as though gods were demurring any attempt to delude the self that individuals progress instead of degenerate insidiously. After slowly mounting the bed and, at last, comfortably propping her head on pillows, she notices the cat looking up at her.*]

There you are so close to me. I don't bite after all, do I? Did you find the litter bowl, Angel, or use a flower pot like your predecessor, or worse? My sense of smell has become dulled with the medication...I wouldn't know...bed sores, circulation problems are the only things acute... I'm losing me one bit at a time. But then we all lose bits of ourselves, don't we? Chuckles the clown might be good for a laugh, good for a fuck, but he lost his humanity long ago. We lose bits of ourselves, darling, with every year that passes. We see our own mortality, and want to own something and procure our piece of happiness. It is understandable, isn't it? But where is the child who once cared about a bird's broken wing? Oh, he is there, but repressed under or mutated into adult form. Oh, god I am exhausted. This getting up from the wheelchair and getting onto the bed is so tiring. What was I saying? Oh, yeah. Now he is a glutton seeking to use whomever he can to get his pleasures and to get ahead, so that he might have something, might have experienced something, might be something great in the judgment of a few others while the brevity of life is staring him down. "The world is the way it is," he says to himself. "I didn't invent it. I just have to live in it—live in this fucking world. Gentle people suffer attrition; malnourished stray animals are plagued with parasites, and lose their fur. Big fish become bigger at eating smaller fish. That's just the natural order. That's just the way things are. Stab this person in the back if he is an obstacle to success for there would be no monumental success at all, no innovation, unless it was this competitive strife. Potency and permanence at the expense of all others will at least stave off predators and premature death for a time."

[*She sits up in the bed and pats her lap hoping that the cat will jump onto it, which it does not do.*] So little and yet so great the effort. My heart is still palpitating for my bed climbing. I'm falling to pieces...falling apart....But saying that over and over again doesn't help, does it? Illusions of grandeur do. A girl suffering from petit mal seizures put on Dilantin and Phenobarbital, unneeded drugs, the same that her aunt took for her rather unseemly grand mal quakes, however had she not taken them timidity would have been transformed to temerity and she would have shot her incestuous father between the eyes...so, medicated as she is now, she succumbs to this rapist's will when in her bed. The medication a curse or a blessing: it is so difficult for one to decipher of her own life-- many stories in my brain, not all of which are vampires, but how can I write them down when slipping in and out of sleep. But then it is a game. I lie to myself that I am a writer and that I have an audience. It provides me with a degree of purpose.

## Chapter Twelve

Morphine, the soporific monotony of recycling the same recurrent themes of life, no I am not human. I don't change any more than the potted poinsettia I chucked him to buying for me a couple months ago. Only when its leaves fall off will it at last be alive. Did I fall asleep for some moments? I think I did. Presently, do I believe in an I? No. Perhaps this self is just beginning to permeate back into the physical shell, and I will soon; but now there seems to be two stygian and fetid effervescent vapors clouded above the shell, and one like a tempest slamming against the other, like a careening motorist colliding into a homeless bag lady. Intimate, embroiling entanglement of integration, maybe; maybe just bloody, perennial, and internecine. Why can't Charles Nichols Debois, St. Nicholas, slide down the chimney and bring me back my television, if not his companionship. He can do it covertly. Go down and then go back up again to higher realms of flying reindeer, flying babes, flying moments of fleeting lechery, flying fucks. I promise not to light the fire too fiercely.

Sometimes I think that my interaction with Chuck is like that which I had with my aunt, who feeling a trace of empathy for me in my plight, decided, when I was 13 years old, that we needed to collect coins together [*she guffaws*]. As love from her was better than no love or abused love, I sucked it up, imbibed it, before I began sucking cock and other illicit activities that I saw as preferable alternatives to this nebulous word, love ...this fucking word, love. Neither of us was interested in the coins or the fellowship. In the same manner, there is a feigned mutual activity when the clown comes around. He says that a ceiling tile with a water stain needs to be replaced, that a smaller table needs to replace the larger one in the kitchen to make it easier for the wheelchair and its nitwit, to get around, that he needs to get an electric stove and oven to replace the gas appliances, as though I can do anything but throw viands into the microwave anyhow. None of it is ever done, but it builds an illusion of amity between us, and we both seem to like the mendacities. He can't let me starve to death, or, can he? Anyhow, I am not keen on going out of this world in emaciated skin-and-bone fashion if I can help it. Maybe Cattwo and I can live off of the meat of those two dogs for a year and defer the inevitable. Pathetic isn't it--existence shored up by interaction--if he wants to come once a month instead so as to spend more time with young women who find men of the badge and brandished gun erotic masters of the universe, diminished as I would be by the prospect--a situation which seems to be happening more and more, I would give my tacit approval. Yes, I would. Just give me the fucking television and don't take away the cat. That's all I ask. No, don't impute Cattwo as a disease carrier and attribute an illness to him. Don't rush him off to a specious veterinarian. Brave, brave! Be brave, or you will float up to the clouds completely in a nervous breakdown. But I have been in this empty pot so long. I am becoming this empty pot; and I can't stay contained in it forever.

## Chapter Thirteen

Stay brave and in so doing become enlarged by the effort: the soul expanding at greater speeds than even the universe. I know it sounds sententious, doesn't it? But maybe it is true. Morals of an atheist—but don't the best truths come from the most objective sources? What do the Christians of America think of atheists—that lacking Christ we will slit your throat, and scrap your guts in the street? If we don't, maybe that is a clue that morality is not a celestial force but arises inherent in the

contemplation of the human mind. Do I believe in a soul? There is an animistic Cherokee in me yet, albeit one who is both Catholic and atheist. Who is so original that she can think outside her culture fully? We are from whence we come.

Do I believe in Chuckles the clown? Now that is a more interesting question. As a clown, I sure do. For our honeymoon we were supposed to go to Thailand, the Land of Smiles, me in the clown's company, a clown cohort of some sort, albeit one with a sheet of paper called a marriage license. Everything was planned meticulously, you know. At least the planning that was done on my side was done meticulously, but in my excitement I did not realize that he was becoming reticent. Well, it was an international honeymoon of sorts. And we did go to an international airport--that is for sure; but it was to watch the planes go up and down. Now if that isn't the doings of a funny clown, I don't know what a clown is. But niggard that he was, we had our fun, I had my love, the love of my life, for a while

For so many years we lived together--well, so many for me who never stayed with anyone for long. But no, no eggs came down year after year. Still, I was hopeful of becoming pregnant and in the hope I mutated from a human being to a female, concentrating on nest and furnishings instead of the structure of my own thought, creating an external home instead of the purest appreciation of the simple pleasures of being. When he had a higher salary he wanted me to stop working just as I had to stop my studies. Sitting around, doing nothing the way he wanted it, the queen, the eromenos, became obsessed by looking at her image in the mirror, and as Mary Wollstonecraft says, became a creature of sensation instead of thought, her greatest pleasure in seeing her eraste once again. Eventually, with no eggs for the nest and the illusion becoming illusory, I returned to an erstwhile me I had shed.

Right now, I hear some type of hum, or murmur that is so indistinct. Laughter of children seems a plausible enough explanation. If I am not wrong, there is a school a few miles away from the house-- this house so far off the outskirts of New Orleans. At least there was one. Have I said this before? Of course I have. Sometimes I think that it is déjà vu; but as I eat my own regurgitation and regurgitate it once again, you cannot expect anything as interesting as déjà vu from one like me. You can't expect a great deal from me, really. No, you really can't. I remember seeing it when we first visited the house through a realtor. We always used a different road thereafter, and I never glanced at it but that once. I am not sure why there would be children's voices so close, but I hear this sound once in a while wafting through the air, wistfully evoking the idea of what could have been and never was. There is no crueler evocation than that. God, I had no idea that the wish to isolate myself from society, write, and raise a garden as a hobby would make me no different than one of the plants. So little we know of outcomes. We make our choices and who can feel the early vibrations from whence it will take us.

## Chapter Fourteen

Apart from Cattwo the only thing alive here is the fire of the smelting of this iron of backbone, once the iron of a formidable being, or what I thought was formidable, now seeming to wince from every pain. Maybe the severity of pain in later years has made every trivial pain terrifying-- maybe if at one time I seemed a force to be reckoned with, at least to myself, someone who would not be cowed, it is because in youth one can drift without money and without any worry that a bottle of morphine will be at one's bedstand, that the insurance will pay for the next hospital visit, that an estranged husband will bring back food, will come back, that there will be companionship and continuity, that the body and mind will be resilient enough for the next upset. Back then, seeing the continent, sleeping on park benches, in hostels, living in guest houses of Buddhist Monasteries, having no money but no responsibilities in exchange for the complete autonomy of oneself, was like living life as the adventure it was meant to be, living it completely [*she drinks a glass of water*]. Now, tremulous and shaken in pain, old before my time. The pain is so much worse after sleeping when one hardly moves--not that I move much when awake; but no, my chagrin is to be as dependent as that cat--that's the greatest pain for me. But isn't that what Marx says: that commerce is the acceptance of our dependency on each other, the acceptance that makes us human, and private property is hubris to think that garnering more than one's share makes him less needy, that being clever enough to deny others their share of money and maintenance makes him or her invincible. It certainly makes one less human.

No, no physical therapy for me. Chuckles the clown frowns at any unnecessary reprieve from his torture--total isolation redoubling the travail with one exacerbating the other in a downward spiral. Such a reprieve would be retrogression to his thorough experiment on human duress. The type of experiment: the effects of solitary confinement on inmates; or, perhaps how one loves from so little in such conditions. But alas, from it I am at one with the child whose father blows him away with a shotgun as police officers approach his car, the totally paralyzed who feel the indignity of being given their suppositories but

can't utter a thing, the blind, the disfigured, the maimed, the emaciated savage with the long hair who used to walk dementedly in one direction and then the other along the Mississippi delta, those with twisting bodies like mine, of course, and all the atrocities I hear in the news. I miss my television, my surrogate, vicarious existence...it is so tiring having to create meaning artificially in these circumstances.

He's liked it--watching my spine curvature get worse year after year. Most men would never be intimate with such a creature but he slammed himself into me for years, going where no man had gone before--at least not in that state. But bodies break down even further with the years, elements pull apart, pure emotions are polluted, and the pleasure of disagreeable bits of hard intimacy adulterate quicker than the rest. Of course that intimacy would end, no matter how much the sadist loved hearing the cripple in agony scream her lights out. Then there was the move from Florida to Louisiana; Katrina that blew away and drowned half the police department, America's finest, and the metamorphosis of plumber to police officer, cop, that took place. And from inserting tools into old drains, he began to insert his tool in young ones, mesmerizing them with badge and gun. Plumber Chuckles was transmogrified.

Never experiencing anything beyond these walls, I say the same things each hour of each day. But I try to change the words so that I will listen to me. I often say that too. *[she laughs]*. Laughter--the laugh that comes from incongruity at A made into B when it shouldn't be B and yet B can be made from A, *[she laughs again]* a laugh of surprise that one is more clever than she thought herself capable of being-- pleased to find something simultaneous and stimulating in self not interconnected and interacting with the rest of the world. A laugh for comic relief in tragedy, a laugh flippant and light-hearted to the grave problems of the day. As I said, it's pathetic how vulnerable human creatures are--the concept of I predicated on interaction with others. "Kenyon" they would need to say before I would believe the name in my own mind. When I stop listening to me it's all gone.

## Chapter Fifteen

*[Head at last rising out of a pillow, but with tears sliding down her cheeks and more moans, half-thinking inside, half murmuring aloud]* What have I done in trying to go back into a deep sleep again? That's the last thing I want. That's like being burnt alive on the pyre. And after the roller coaster ride of a deep sleep, consciousness of oneself and her surroundings skips beats like a weak heart ready for another cardiac arrest. And the dreams—not of being homeless but of being married: photographs of a woman with her husband and children all with their shoes off, their bare feet looking gigantic in the foreground near the cameraman; others in front of grandmother's house; still others in front of their camper; and one of the altercation of husband and wife at the campsite; one of the bloody bodied woman being stuffed in the trunk; of him dressed in formal attire at that inconclusive inquest as to what had happened to his wife; of the social worker smiling with the two boys; of bringing them to his door; of him slamming the door in her face, and locking it; of him hitting the boys with a fireplace poker; and of the house blowing up from that deliberate gas explosion right there before the eyes of the social worker.

What am I saying? Everyone has dreams. They mean nothing. Yes the *I* has to be mirrored from other eyes. I am slipping away—consciousness nothing more than a rug under one's feet that can be pulled out at any moment. Alone and useless like this, a bit like the shut-in elderly but so much worse—well, how would I know that (bad at any rate)-- as I don't know if I am going to run out of food and starve to death here. I've been unemployed before with brain thumping suddenly like a restive and confused horse bucking off its rider, but there one can pull on reins. In this case there is nothing. One just watches consciousness rise and tumble off into some type of reverse gravity into some upper abyss, and then magically descend from whence it came. *[She holds her head and stares at her bookshelf for some minutes, and then some clouds seen through one of the higher and more regular proportioned windows]* I am okay now. I don't know why, but I'm better now. It isn't, under these circumstances, so strange to see consciousness vanish. It is much odder to see it return.

Red hot iron finger tips along the tortuous spine... uh-hh! *[A set of singular tears roll down her cheeks and she sits up stiff and erect, silent for some moments]* I want to curse but all expletives are futile with something so ineffable. I shake now-- from what? Physical pain--I've had worse. The loneliness and isolation is not as bad as it was when the first cat died and there was nothing to feed and take care of, nothing to interact with, with Charles gone for two weeks. There's a fading away now of self maybe in part from medication --I should be going in for blood tests each month but he doesn't want to pay the deductible even

when it is with my disability money, money that he uses as a down payment on a new sports car and god knows what...I know. He thinks I don't, but I do. I sometimes wake up when I hear him drive up at 5 in the morning each day to feed the dogs. I see what he drives up in. I see that it is him. Once or twice in the past two years it was not him at all, but a woman. I could have yelled out the window to the impostor that I was a captive here, but I didn't. What good would it do except expedite my entrance into a nursing home that would impair me from writing, impair me from any autonomy. He knows that I would not be willing to forfeit the little independence of will that I have. One yell out to a postman delivering mail at a distance on the long drive or someone feeding the dogs when he can't, and I would be finished. He knows. I know. We have that in common.

## Chapter Sixteen

Name, moniker-- not even '*Hey you*' spoken in this direction--losing any sense or delusion of being (a ghost, or some dead, otherworldly thing, maybe, but if there is, I don't believe in such things)—strong in this weakness, but it can falter—forgetting to put on the brakes when getting in and out of the wheelchair and won't there be a pretty spill just beginning to decompose on the floor when the clown marches by--one moment okay, one moment a dispersing vapor—why was this needed, this burden put upon me, as if the human condition were not tenuous as a sheet of paper in the best of times, the human soul were not translucent and easily penetrable as a jellyfish even its most active hour—trenchant finger tips along my back—male no doubt—this making man out to be a deliberate, unrepentant purveyor of pain, a Sadistic masseuse (isn't it misandry—it is, but that doesn't mean that the Miss has made a mistake) —watch the television, for those who can, glance at newspaper headlines, as even prisoners in solitary confinement have to have a yellowed tribune on a shelf, and one sees the hunter instinct diffused ever so lightly, ever so acceptingly, into the whole fabric of society, into the crevices of all modern, urban pursuits to compensate for lack of the hunt, and give man something to live for—nay, nobody sees the ubiquitous spread, and yet there it is nonetheless; not that the instinctual nurturers of womankind aren't unkind, with their own materialistic agenda of replication and comfort of nest that must be secured at all cost—indeed they have fangs of their own, and what sort of vipers they would be if bereft of maternal instincts, God only knows—without tragedy humbling one with the recognition of mortality, even those rare human beings separate from all the rest will turn monstrously into Alexander the Greats ordering their sieges of Tyre in Phoenicia in their great pique that they, the Sons of God should be denied entrance to one of her island's temples, the Sons of God of course needing to commune with Father Divinity most urgently to be the gods they are meant to be [*Her mental discernment is overturned by acute pain, and like the almost departed in their last seconds of life, she stares at the ceiling—in her case, the blades of the ceiling fan and the obstacles of walls leading her into vacuity. She stays this way until the pain subsides. Then she laughs. She cries. She does not speak for several minutes, watching the fan dice the air as she tries to breathe naturally and find equanimity*]. Yes, always so much worse after sleeping soundly for some hours... [*She begins to speak her ideas aloud*]. Finally able to sleep well and get some mental restoration, and then there is hell to pay afterwards. It's always that way. Where's the fucking morphine? Where's the morphine to fuck me up good?... Oh, I see it. There it is behind a book. What book? Shakespeare? No, Petrarch. Cat, where's cat?... Oh, there you are. Hard to believe that you haven't budged an inch in all this time. You found a cozy spot by the bed, didn't you? Maybe you are warming up to me despite being afraid of that which your eyes see. But I swear to you that that which appears to be a monster has already been pummeled and ravaged by others, by fate itself. This aggravates its sensitivities and diffidence —its empathy. It also militates against the chances of what looks like a monster actually being one, and that is a most useful maxim to have if you continue to stay with me. Needn't worry, Cat. Don't get up for my sake. I can procure the morphine with a stretch of the arms, but thanks for offering anyway. Right arm still works, of course. Spine might be retreating into a ball or some odd geometric shape not yet devised by man, but arms still extend to the bedstand and the bottle. Just a drop onto the tongue from the syringe, they say. Such is the caveat, seemingly to keep one like me from choosing to go out in one major wave; but if it's lawsuits they are worried about, Cat, they don't need to worry about me.

## Chapter Seventeen

In the past, I would leave with him for the hospital and every passing tree, street sign, pedestrian, and motorist along the way seemed exotic in form, alien grandeur. I actually loved those outings. Sometimes appointments were cancelled and deferred, but we did go to them eventually. I would be tongue tied when we at last stepped into the hospital for various reasons. The doctors would seem like superstars. When you don't see people every day, that is how they are. Quit judging me, Cat. It might sound crazy, but the infrequency can make regular people seem rather glamorous, and a fool like me can become star-struck easily. Chuck would speak for me, often making his excuses on why we had not come earlier. I would just smile. Smiles ward off any potential problem. They really do. People are such suckers for them.

I wasn't terribly isolated in Florida the way I am here even when everything started going really bad for me so precipitously. Humans fall. We are all falling into old age, cellular regenerative mistakes, and death. What is scary is when it comes upon us suddenly. But even in those bad extremes there were always phone calls to friends, law clerks and a secretary from work. And, when surgery wasn't involved, those monthly or bimonthly outings were a godsend. It was like rising up from the grave.

You know, Cattwo, he was just a plumber for most of his years with me. And when I became handicapped he began to develop this cripple-lechery. He had always enjoyed suctioning out ladies' pipes you might say, inserting his tools in anything leaky you might say, especially when it engendered such din and clamor from one in her travail. He did have a proclivity for sodomy in his earlier days with me, so really, Cat, you should not be so shocked by this seemingly startling revelation. Surprise is a bit melodramatic. It is such a specious emotion, don't you think? Perversion should be expected. Variety is the spice of life, as they say; and nothing makes a man feel so virile as doing something that is different, whatever is a bit out of the ordinary. Leaving India, Alexander passed through a desert—I forget the name-- only because no one had ever lived when trying to pass through it before. And if a man can bring on pleasurable moans or painful groans from his victim, it motivates him all the more to make a conquest of her again (nature's plan, of course, to impregnate a woman, you see). A good punch at another's face or a mean fuck thrust any man into life, out of the malaise that can so easily overtake one in the perfunctory obligations that domineer over and suffocate a life. We should be careful as gentle pacifists not to condemn violence for, you see, it is a component of historical materialism and the spark of life.

But like all fetishes, that one eventually ceased. Then we moved here a year before Katrina. There was the storm and the police force became skeletal thereafter. They recruited policemen for the force. He was confident and cocky, so if anyone demurred his lack of experience, the objection did not stop him from acquiring a job. He was good enough to suit their purposes. In New Orleans looking strong and corrupt is its own special qualification. The honest ones are to be feared. The dishonest ones are in their own shit so they aren't going to get anybody else into trouble. You have heard a bit of this before, haven't you? Well, as you have been with me for such a short period it is good to get all of the details thoroughly engraved on your pea-sized brain. That way you will know all and feel comfortable with me, see me as broken and vulnerable as you are, and nothing to be afraid of in the least. I am, after all, a human being--one of the very few. I know such repetition can be excessive. Catone had a brain aneurysm from listening to me for so many years. I did him in. I know I did. But it's done now.

Are you really asleep all this time, you lazy beast--you in the corner-- or just trying to abscond from the bombardment of these repeated themes?...a drop has fallen, a magical bloody drop in a spoon...when one has had enough of the day, and can take no more, morphine is the answer [*She swallows the liquid*]. Now, now, down the gullet you go--the sanguinary to the sanguine or the sanguine to the sanguinary, I don't know. When I talk loudly enough your eyes open slightly....ever so slightly; then they close again. I do the same. I hardly know if I am awake or asleep so I talk, talk, talk aloud to myself. You should try it yourself for some faint distinction. And two communicating spontaneously--as spontaneous as two can in an Alcatraz so secure the main guard can go on holiday, as spontaneous as can be done when one of the party meows-- and we both would be human. I know silently, in your mind, you are admonishing me for taking the morphine, which you think was a mistake. It was just a little bit. But really, had I taken the whole bottle would it be so wrong to end it now rather than allow organs to malfunction and diseases to prey on me at an elderly and more fragile juncture? If you were to be logical, instead of letting me affect you so viscerally, me ending my life now or ending it later would be an irrelevant occurrence to the world, to the universe. Most of us don't have the least chance of being remembered by a single individual beyond two or three decades. You are such a good listener--what great solace it is for me that you are confined with me, confined to me here.

## Chapter Eighteen



*[Sedentary and defunct from contributing nothing, and nothing new in the environment to even make a marginal impact upon her, her last seconds before falling into hours of sleep and being at last propelled into an imaginary world of human forms, are of devising ways by which she might ingratiate herself to the cat so as to feel it curled upon her lap. She has no ambition—only the wistful hope for procurement of a winsome touch. But once asleep, there is no quietude to be had in the sullied images of dreams: a costumed cook in Mardi Gras removing each fish from a large plastic tub of water, dropping each one onto the outdoor pavement, and beating its head with a board so that it might change from fresh being to fresh viand and be grilled and served to the decadent palates of customers sitting under small tables on tatami mats; breakers during a storm roiling sediment and extracting the sand of the shore line, and bleeding birds caught in a house and slamming into all the barred windows. Dead in Platonic sleep of the three tiered soul, Kenyon sees three doors in the house and hears three pronged knocking upon each of them. A buxom woman is at one doorstep, Kenyon's husband at a second, and Scoliosis at the third point of entry.]*

"Sorry to bother you. I didn't know who lived here, or if anyone did. I've been hoping to meet a neighbor. I live right down the road from you. Well, we do, my husband and I."

"Isn't that area a forest?"

"Yes, it was—is, apart from the small area we cut down. We built a house. We have been living there for the past three months. I guess that you have surely passed it during this time."

"I don't get out much. I am here most of the time—all the time, really"

"May I come in?—

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"Sorry, I only had time to pick up a few things from the convenience store"

"That's okay. I am always thankful for what you care to do for me."

"That's your way of saying that I don't care. I care too much, Kenyon. That's the problem--my life is slipping away taking care of you. Can't you see that?"

"I do. All these years cannot have been easy on you, Charles. I am grateful to see you. I really am, but I know that you have other responsibilities and cannot spend all your time with me."

"That's right. At least you acknowledge it even if your feelings say something different. I've got to get out of this trap Kenyon. We need to think about getting a divorce. Don't I deserve to have a family—a wife that can give me kids? At least a wife that isn't ugly and can move around, do things. Year after year I thought that the surgeries would make things better."

"They made it worse."

"But I did not perform them. I am no doctor. I just accepted what they said. So did you. And you are the one who made the final choice to have those operations."

"I know. It is true. You aren't to blame, Charles. And you have a perfect right to go on with life."

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"Sis, is it you? Kenyon?"

"Yes. Yes, it is. "

"You are so much older. I can't hardly believe it is you. I have been trying to track you down all these years. I didn't know that you had left Florida."

"I did, Scoliosis. But me too. I did not stop. I knew you weren't dead despite what they said. I even knew, despite what the grownups said, that there was no such thing as death. Every day of every year I always thought that, one way or another, we would find each other again."

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"Is the coffee okay? I'm sorry. Your name?"

"Pamela. Yes, it is fine. Don't you get out at all, Kenyon? "

"No. I am here in this wheelchair. Sorry."

"You are crying? What's wrong?"

"I don't see anybody but him, and he stays away from me most of the time. He can't stand me. He can't stand the sight of me, and I am all alone here, Pamela."

"How often does he come around?"

"Once every two or three weeks. And when he comes he just stays a half hour at most."

"And you are all alone during the rest of the time?"

"Yes."

"You are completely paralyzed?"

"No, not completely. But it is degenerative--degenerative scoliosis, plus a lot of blotched surgeries to get me to walk."

"If he hasn't been taking care of you, we have to report it to authorities so that you can get the care that you need."

"Pamela, he is a cop. It isn't so easy, and even if he wasn't, I couldn't get him into trouble. I am so lucky that finally I have a friend. And if it is no trouble, if you could come by and check up on me in case I fall or in case he doesn't bring any food, I would be so grateful."

And when she awakens, with no interaction of urgent obligations and confusion from which to delude herself of having importance that the universe denies to all, what themes should she forge out of such a life? Life is canisters of paint that should spill, with colors defusing into each other, and boundaries blurring. What theme could be more natural with the limitations of self as they are and the awareness of mortality becoming larger the more one moves forward on the road of life? That myriad hours and much of the self invests itself in extension confirms the shallow nature of the self and the absence of the soul, that one forgets herself to another, that the colors of one's character are diluted, and then the whole composition fades, what can be more natural? And of nature, neutrinos moving faster than the speed of light, upending cause and effect so that the misnomer has to be reclassified as effect and cause or effect with no cause whatsoever, she has never assumed it to be otherwise and has never believed the world to be anything but a neutrino, or that there really is a purpose in any of it.